
A SNOWFLAKE KISS FOR
Lady Sophie
SEASONS of LOVE
BOOK ONE
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A Snowflake Kiss for Lady Sophie

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Prologue

Lady Sophie Maxwell's bedroom had been transformed into the sisters' headquarters for their new mission. All three of her sisters had crowded into the space, and the flickering candlelight gave the meeting a clandestine air.

It would have all felt quite dramatic—maybe even romantic—if the topic at hand wasn't so distressingly pragmatic. But there was nothing for it. At least one of them needed to be wed quickly, and this upcoming house party was their best chance.

"Really, Sophie, must we go over this yet again?" Her sister Serena added an exaggerated yawn from where she lay sprawled out atop Sophie's bed.

Sophie sighed. It wasn't her fault that Serena had worn herself out riding yet again. "We leave for the house party at first light," Sophie reminded her. "We'll be separated in two carriages, and it's not as though we can talk about this in front of Tobias. It will only distress him."

Serena sat up with a wince at the mention of their brother. He was the oldest of the five Maxwell siblings, and it was well understood that he'd borne the most difficult burden after their parents' deaths.

They'd all thought he'd have more time to prepare before taking over the earldom, and now poor Tobias was overwhelmed by his new responsibilities.

Responsibilities that included taking care of his four younger sisters.

Hopefully not for much longer, however. After two years of mourning—first when their mother died from a fever and then after their father's sudden passing—the young ladies were finally ready to rejoin society.

And marry posthaste, if all went according to plan.

"We all understand what we must do at this house party," Sarah assured Sophie. She adjusted her reading glasses as she perched on the bed beside Serena. "And our aunt has done her part. There's nothing for it now but to see the plan through."

“Yes, but it couldn’t hurt to ensure we’re prepared for all eventualities,” Sophie said. Their aunt, Lady Clara Winterbourne, had helped concoct this scheme to hurry along the girls’ marriage prospects the moment they were out of mourning rather than having to wait another few months for the start of a proper season.

Three months seemed like an eternity when there were four young ladies to be matched.

Her youngest sister Samantha’s lips pursed a pout. “Only you could make finding a match sound so very practical, Sophie.”

Sophie lifted a shoulder. “I like to be prepared.” She turned to Sarah. “Do you have the list?”

Sarah nodded, pulling a carefully folded piece of parchment from the reticule that perpetually hung from her wrist. She unfolded it carefully, adjusting her glasses once more. “Here it is. The list of eligible gentlemen our aunt kindly invited to the house party.”

Samantha sighed. “Doesn’t anyone else find it unbearably depressing to be discussing our potential husbands in such a way?”

“What way is that?” Serena teased. “As though they are pigs to be bought at market?”

Samantha laughed. “Precisely.” She threw her arms out wide. “Don’t any of you wish to fall in love?”

She was met with three blank stares.

Samantha dropped her arms. “Right. Of course not. I’d nearly forgotten who I was talking to. Not one of you cares about romance or courtships. And you,” she shot Sophie a pointed glance. “You’ve already experienced a proper London season.”

Sophie winced. She couldn’t help the fact that her sisters had missed out on their debuts while in mourning, but she still regretted the fact that her sweet, loving sisters hadn’t had the same chance Sophie had been given.

She’d botched it, of course, ending the season with a tainted reputation and fewer choices for a good match than before it had begun. But at least she’d had a taste of excitement. She’d even had a fleeting whiff of romance.

It hadn’t been much of a tryst, but enough to know that passion and love were fanciful myths meant to make marriage more appealing to young ladies. She was older and wiser now. She had no such hopes anymore, but she couldn’t blame Samantha for her youthful dreams.

“I just want a chance to dance and laugh and flirt before settling down in marriage,” Samantha said with a sigh. “Is that so much to ask?”

“Of course not, Sam,” Serena said kindly.

Sophie and Sarah shared a knowing look. They’d been over this before in private. As the two eldest, they shared a similarly pragmatic view of the situation. They didn’t all have to marry. Not all at once, at least. And there was no reason it had to be Samantha, even though she was widely regarded as the one most sought after.

Sophie straightened her shoulders. Samantha might have been the prettiest, but Sophie was the oldest. This was her responsibility to bear. “Samantha, no one expects *you* to marry immediately. So long as one of us finds a good match, then the others may take more time.”

Serena arched a brow. “Not too much time, I hope. Tobias needs to start a family of his own. He can’t be expected to act as our guardian forever.”

“No, of course not,” Sophie said quickly. “I only meant that Samantha doesn’t have to make a match at this house party. And once I have a husband, he and I can help Tobias with the duties of escorting all of you.”

“True. Besides, Sam, you’re still young,” Sarah added in agreement, smiling fondly at their baby sister—who was far from a baby now at eighteen. She turned to Sophie and Serena. “If Samantha feels so strongly about experiencing a proper season before marrying, I say we support her.”

Samantha smiled. “Thank you, Sarah.”

“I agree completely. Samantha should experience a true season,” Sophie said, earning another sweet smile of gratitude from Samantha.

Sophie’s smile faltered. It was rather unfortunate that their youngest sister also happened to be not only the most beautiful but also the most charming of the lot. She could snap her fingers and have any gentleman she wished, no doubt.

It was even more unfortunate that Sophie, the eldest, was the most plain with the least number of prospects after being thrown over her first season.

And Sarah, who was next in age, was...well, she was pretty in her own way with her fair hair and wide eyes. But as she preferred to pore over accounts and discuss the latest innovations in estate

management, she wasn't exactly the belle of any ball.

And then there was Serena—beautiful, fun, vibrant—and completely uninterested in being married or running a household of her own.

Truly, Samantha was the most ideal candidate for marriage between the four of them, but it wasn't fair to foist the responsibility onto her young shoulders. The rest of them would have to find a way.

"I'm all for Sam having her day in the sun," Serena said with a wink at her younger sister. "And I have no problem being the first to marry, if that's the way it goes. Just point me toward this desperate earl our aunt has been on about, and let's end this conversation once and for all."

Sophie laughed. "Serena, do you truly care so little for who you end up spending your life with?"

Serena tilted her head to the side. She shared Sophie's dark hair and hazel eyes, but while Sophie's locks were pinned tightly atop her head, Serena's curls were loose about her shoulders and a smirk tugged at her lips. "All I ask is that he grant me my freedom. And I'll do the same in return, of course." She shrugged. "That sounds like a rather idyllic arrangement to me."

Sarah shook her head. "Not me. I'd prefer to find a partner. Someone who values my opinions and my skills, so that I might be as useful in my new home as I am here."

"I imagine Tobias would hate to see you marry so soon," Samantha said, eyeing the blonde bluestocking with her ink-stained fingers as she fidgeted with her spectacles. "Who will help him keep the books if you should wed?"

Samantha straightened in her seat by the vanity, her chin notching up. "No, if there is a gentleman there who wishes to wed me…" She glanced over at Sophie. "And he meets all of our fearless leader's standards, of course. Then I shall do my part and marry well for the betterment of my family."

Sophie just barely held back a laugh at Samantha's flair for the dramatic. Her sister meant it, and that made her heart ache. All three of her sisters would do anything to help each other and their brother, no matter the sacrifice.

But it was up to her as the eldest, and she knew it well. "Hopefully it will not come to that, Samantha," Sophie said. "From what our aunt has said in her letters, the situation ought to be well

in hand. The Earl of Rushton will be in attendance, and she's already spoken to him about his need for a wife."

"Is he truly that destitute?" Serena asked, her brows drawing together in concern for this gentleman none of them had met.

"It appears so," Sarah answered on her behalf. "Our aunt says he is most willing to make a good match with one of us."

"Does he care which one of us?" Serena asked with a laugh. "Or does it not matter which sister he ends up with just so long as she has a dowry?"

Sophie arched her brows. "It's rather difficult to judge this gentleman for looking for a match just as we are. He's just as eager to wed, and that's all that matters."

"And if he's hideous?" Samantha asked quietly. "If he's cruel or slovenly or—"

"Really, Samantha," Sophie said with a laugh. "I hardly think our aunt would recommend him if he were any of those things."

Samantha shrugged, her eyes glinting with laughter as well. "She's getting on in years, you know. She may very well have lost her senses."

This had Selena falling back against the pillows with a giggle as Sarah rolled her eyes with a grudging grin.

Their Aunt Clara was actually their great-aunt, but no one could accuse her of losing her faculties. The older lady was still sharp as a whip and they all knew it.

"I don't believe he's anything but a true gentleman," Sophie said. "But if for some reason he falls short of our expectations, there should be no lack of suitors for us to consider." She nodded meaningfully toward the list Sarah still held.

"Ah yes, the list," Serena teased.

"Did they all accept the invitation?" Samantha asked.

"All but one," Sarah said, perusing the names they'd drawn up for their aunt to invite.

"So everyone there will be an eligible man in search of a wife," Selena said in a bland tone. "That sounds frightening."

"Like letting a bunch of foxes into the henhouse," Samantha agreed.

"I'd rather not think of us as prey in this scenario," Sophie said with a wrinkle of her nose.

"On the contrary, I'd say we're the ones baiting the trap." Sarah said this so seriously that the other three burst out laughing.

Sophie's laughter faded but her smile remained as she watched her sisters teasing each other about which gentleman on the list they'd prefer. These three ladies and her brother. *They* were why she was doing this. "I'd say we're merely giving ourselves the best chance possible of a good match. There's nothing wrong with that."

"No, indeed not." Serena was still eyeing the list over Sarah's shoulder. "Goodness. I recognize all these names. They're the most sought-after gentlemen in London."

"Well, except for one," Sarah pointed out.

Samantha sat on Sarah's other side to read the names. "Yes, what happened to the Duke of Barton? I thought he was meant to be the biggest catch of them all."

Sophie made an indelicate snorting sound that had her other sisters glancing up. She sometimes forgot that she was the only one with any real world experience outside of this country estate. Not that she'd ever met the scandalous duke—he'd been off touring the continent during her one season in London. But even she had heard the whispers of his debaucherous behavior. "His Grace might be the biggest catch, but he's also a notorious rake." She nodded toward the parchment. "Definitely not fit for this list."

Sophie ignored the knowing, sympathetic looks they cast her way.

Yes, yes. She'd been the fool who'd fallen for a rake her first season. But that only meant she'd learned her lesson. She'd use her head rather than her heart at this house party. Falling for a rake, wasn't a mistake she'd ever make again.

"Aunt Clara didn't invite the Duke of Barton or any other renowned rakes, or any man who's known to have a gambling problem or a cruel temper," Sarah explained to her sisters. "Aside from Aunt Clara's close friends, the guest list is made up entirely of marriageable gentlemen."

"Except for Tobias's friends," Serena pointed out.

Samantha laughed. "Perhaps someone should have told him the purpose of this party. Then surely he wouldn't have invited his old school mates."

He wouldn't have. Much as Tobias loved his old friends, not even he would want to see them married to one of his sisters.

"We agreed that we wouldn't tell Tobias about this plan to find a match. He wouldn't approve," Sophie said simply.

They all nodded in agreement and understanding.

While all four of them understood the way things stood, Tobias seemed intent on ignoring the fact that they ought to be married. He'd been avoiding the topic at every turn, insisting that there was no rush to make any changes.

If it were up to him, his beloved sisters would stay in this house forever.

Which was exactly why this party was so important.

Sophie took a deep, steadying breath as she watched Sarah slip the list back into her reticule. If Tobias wasn't able to take the appropriate steps to see them married and out of the house, then it was up to her to make the first overture.

For Sophie, it was already decided—she wasn't leaving this house party without a sure prospect.

Chapter One

Sophie and her sisters had visited their great-aunt's country estate countless times, but she'd never once seen it like this.

"So beautiful," Samantha breathed beside her as they paused in the entrance to the ballroom where a chandelier flickered with candlelight overhead and music swelled from the quartet of musicians in the far corner.

"Like something out of *Midsummer Night's Dream*," Serena added. "Only in winter."

Sophie nodded. It was all she could do. For all her determination upon arriving at this house party earlier today, nerves were getting the best of her now. Her aunt's staff truly had outdone themselves to make this house party festive and elegant. Every surface was decorated for Christmastide, with holly and wreaths hung in every room.

But with the sun down and the candles lit, Sarah was right. It felt like they were about to step onto the set of a theatrical performance. Which might have been a pleasant sensation if Sophie wasn't so acutely aware of how much rested upon her performance.

She straightened, grateful when Serena stepped forward on one side and Sarah and Samantha gathered close on the other. She could do this—for them.

She had to.

With that thought, she forced a small smile and all four entered the room at once, causing all the gentlemen in attendance to turn and stare.

"Goodness, there are so many handsome men here," Serena said in that teasing tone of hers. She was trying to put them all at ease, and Sophie supposed it was working because she felt laughter bubbling up inside of her as Serena continued with her brazen remarks under her breath. "If the Christmastide theme had failed, our aunt could have announced this to be the first annual eligible bachelor extravaganza."

"There are some women here," Sophie murmured back, her tone defensive.

This had been her idea, after all, and in the face of all those manly stares, it was starting to seem like a very bad one. How obvious was it that they were here looking for husbands? How much had their aunt told these gentlemen?

"Do you suppose there's such a thing as a dandy museum?" Sarah offered in that serious tone of hers, which made her jest that much more amusing.

They happened to be passing two men with slicked back hair and clothing more brilliant in color than anything Sophie had ever worn.

"If so, I do believe we're in it," Samantha said with a laugh.

"Ah, there they are," Aunt Clara called out.

Tobias spotted them at the same time, and Sophie saw him make his excuses to his school chums. The tenseness of their entrance was shattered as her brother and aunt approached from opposite sides of the room.

The men went back to their drinks and their conversations, and Sophie noticed with some relief that her aunt had, in fact, invited women as well.

Older women, mainly. And married women, from what Sophie could tell. But at least this wasn't an outwardly obvious mini marriage mart as she'd originally feared.

"You ladies certainly know how to make an entrance," Tobias said with a grin.

"We try," Serena teased with a toss of her dark locks.

Sarah smiled. "You look well rested after our journey this morning, Toby."

Sarah was right. Just getting away from the estate and spending time with some of his friends seemed to have lifted the weight from his shoulders. For the first time in weeks, his smile seemed genuine and his posture relaxed.

It was a relief to see, and it made Sophie more sure than ever that this plan was the right one. The best thing she and her sisters could do to help Tobias was to find good matches and ease his burden.

With that thought, she took their aunt aside. "Has the earl arrived yet?"

Aunt Clara's eyes glittered with mischief and her silver coiffed hair bounced as she nodded eagerly. "Oh yes. He's here and I've already had a word with him." Aunt Clara's deep wrinkles creased

even more as she gave an exaggerated wink. “The engagement is as good as done. Assuming you approve of him, of course.”

“I’m sure I will find him perfectly acceptable if you do.” Sophie’s smile felt wan and her stomach churned with nerves. “Now I suppose I just have to meet him.”

“Oh yes, we’ll have to make an introduction as soon as possible.” Aunt Clara was looking around them eagerly. “I don’t think you’ll be disappointed, dear. The earl is handsome, tall, and kind as could be.”

Sophie tried to widen her smile. “He sounds perfect.”

He truly did. She and her aunt had done their research, and aside from the fact that he was desperate for a large dowry—which actually worked in her favor—the earl had a sterling reputation.

That reputation would go a long way toward repairing her own tarnished name, and in return he’d receive the dowry he so desperately needed to restore his family’s estate.

“Ah, there he is now,” her aunt said.

Eagerness and terror warred within her as she bit her lip to keep from turning at once.

“He and his friend are walking toward the far doors,” Aunt Clara continued.

Sophie tried to cast a sidelong look and found several gentlemen roaming about in that direction. “Er, which one?”

“The striking figure in black.”

As if on cue, the crowds parted until there were only two men striding toward the far door.

She spotted him right away. He was the only one wearing such a stark black coat, and it seemed to match the midnight shade of his hair. Striking. That was the first word that came to mind. Handsome was the second. Breathtakingly so.

“Come. If we make haste we can intercept them in the hallway.” Her aunt set off with a quick clip, her shorter legs moving faster than anyone would expect from a woman her age, and her slim form sliding between clusters of partygoers as Sophie tried to follow in her wake.

But while Sophie was taller than the older woman, she also had more width. Her curves and the fact that she did not wish to break into a run in the middle of the ballroom had her following at a more stately pace as she attempted to weave her way through the crowd without calling too much attention to herself.

Aunt Clara was so petite that at some point, Sophie lost sight of her. But it was impossible to lose track of the earl in black. He stood a solid foot taller than his friend who wore a dark blue jacket and had longer hair several shades lighter.

She saw them walking through a doorway and quickly followed in their wake. Surely Aunt Clara would reach them first, and she didn't wish to keep the earl waiting. Just before they left the room, the earl turned back, and Sophie felt as though she'd been slammed in the chest by the force of his gaze.

It fell on her instantly, as though he'd been seeking her out in the crowd just as she'd been tracking him. His eyes were dark and the look in them fierce, like he was the one on the hunt and not she.

A predator. The phrase popped into her head as his gaze held hers captive. His jaw was square, his nose straight, and his brows thick. He looked like a king surveying his land, and she couldn't look away.

She came to a sudden stop, causing a servant to bump into her and very nearly toppling his tray.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she murmured hastily.

The interruption had broken that strange moment. The intensity of his dark gaze had been unnerving. The moment had been oddly intimate. Almost as though he'd recognized her like she'd recognized him.

But then...of course he'd recognized her. He'd no doubt learned all about her from her aunt just as she'd learned about him.

"Silly Sophie," she muttered under her breath as she moved away from the servant, continuing in the direction the earl had gone at a more leisurely pace. Her heart was still pounding wildly, but she wasn't about to lose her focus or her nerve.

Her family needed her.

She slid through the last of the crowd before rounding the corner into the hallway.

"Looking for me?" The dark rumble in the darkness made her squeak as she whirled around.

"Oh! It's you." Of all the foolish utterances to slip from her mouth, that was the silliest of them all.

Of course it was him. She'd been following him, had she not? He took a step forward into the warm glow of a candlelight, and her breath left her in a rush of air.

Goodness. He'd been striking in the ballroom, but here in the flickering shadows, he was like a hero from a gothic novel.

A *handsome* hero. Her mouth went dry and her lips parted. A far more handsome hero than she'd been led to believe. Why had Aunt Clara not mentioned that he was strikingly attractive? Surely even at her age, her aunt had to be aware of the sort of impression he made on a woman.

Sophie was suddenly and painfully aware of her own lack of beauty. She never really cared that she wasn't as dazzlingly pretty as Samantha or Serena...until right this moment.

Oh, she was not vile to look at, she supposed, but if her one and only hint of romance had taught her anything, it was that beauty and charisma were not what drew a man's attention her way. Fortune and good connections were what would land her a husband. She'd long since understood that.

His lips quirked up on one side as the silence between them lengthened. And that was when she fully realized—

They were alone.

She glanced around them with a start. Where was Aunt Clara? And his friend he'd been walking with?

"Were you seeking me out for a reason, Miss…?"

"Sophie," she said quickly. "Lady Sophie, my lord."

His eyes widened slightly. "Ah, so you are the famous Lady Sophie I've heard so much about."

Heat crept into her cheeks, and she was eternally grateful for the lack of light in this passageway. She knew her aunt had been corresponding with him about her and a potential match, of course, but she hadn't expected him to address the topic quite so quickly nor with such directness.

"Indeed, my lord. And I've heard much about you as well."

His eyes seemed to flash with dark laughter. "I'm sure you have."

She hadn't thought her mouth could become any drier, but that odd comment sounded so...so...*scandalous*.

But surely not. He wasn't a scandal. The earl was known to be upright and proper. She cleared her throat. "Perhaps it would be best if we wait for my aunt to join us—"

"And where would be the fun in that?" he shot back. The curve of his lips was absolutely wicked.

"I-I—" Oh drat. She couldn't seem to form a coherent thought.

She was too busy trying to understand how this upstanding earl could be so very different from what she'd expected. She swallowed and tried again. "That is, we haven't been properly introduced."

His chuckle was a low rumble in the dark. "And yet I'd say we're already acquainted, wouldn't you? You've heard of me, I've heard of you…" He waved a hand as if to say, the formalities beyond that were meaningless. His smile was slow and knowing. "From what I understand, we each have a need that the other can fill."

She blinked, her lips parting but no words forming. Where on earth was her aunt? Or anyone else, for that matter?

She should never have set off without Tobias or one of her sisters. They were likely worried about her sudden disappearance.

The thought of her family gave her a burst of strength, and she remembered exactly what she was doing here. Her spine straightened and she drew in a deep breath. "I would prefer to wait until my aunt or brother is here to discuss this further, but I am indeed glad to know that you and I have an understanding."

That smirk grew into a full smile. "An understanding. Now that sounds a bit presumptuous but—"

"Oh, I didn't mean—"

"No, no. I admire your straightforwardness, Lady Sophie. I believe honesty is an asset, particularly when forming a...partnership."

A thrill ran down her spine at the way he said 'partnership.' Her heart thudded wildly. How on earth had he made 'partnership' sound so dangerous and forbidden?

He seemed to be waiting for a response, his head tipped down and his gaze fixed on hers in anticipation.

Her heart was racing so fast her head felt light and the room began to spin. She swallowed hard. *Be strong*, she commanded.

For her family's sake, she would see this through. And if her potential future husband wanted straightforwardness, then that was what she would give him. "As I'm sure you've already heard, I am very eager to marry. And from what I understand, we would be a good match."

There. She inhaled deeply. She'd said it. She couldn't quite bring herself to point out the fact that he needed her ample dowry, but she suspected he didn't need her reminder.

And judging by the way he stared her down evenly, without a single protest or even a show of surprise at her candor...maybe this

truly would be a good match.

They were of the same mind and shared a common goal. That was a decent start to marriage, was it not? A better understanding than most matches she'd heard of, at least.

"A good match, hmm?" he murmured. With a brow arched high, his smirk looked positively devilish. "Before we go committing to marriage, don't you think we ought to at least share a kiss first?"

Her inhale was so sharp it sounded between them like a whip. The music in the other room was drowned out by her own beating heart. He glanced upward meaningfully, and that was when she saw it.

A mistletoe.

She blinked a few times. He was in jest. Surely. She resisted the urge to look around her for her aunt or anyone else who might intervene.

The time for relying on others was through. This was her bargain to make. This was her future at stake just as surely as it was her family who counted on her to see it through.

She drew in a shaky breath as her gaze dropped to his full, sinfully curved lips.

"After all," he said with a low drawl. "There's more than one way a couple ought to fit, don't you think? Before we go any further, I'd say we ought to find out if we are compatible in other ways. Wouldn't you agree?"

Was he in jest? Her gaze met his and she just barely swallowed a squeak of alarm. No. No, he was definitely serious.

And perhaps he wasn't entirely wrong. If she was serious about this, she ought to prove it. And what harm could it do? It was only one kiss.

And with a man who was as good as hers.

She drew in a shaky breath.

"Y-yes," she said in a broken, uneven voice. "I suppose that would be all right."

Chapter Two

Raith's lips parted in surprise.

Then again, everything about this meeting had been delightfully different and not at all what he'd expected.

He was glad he'd decided to come, even though he hadn't been on the original guest list. As a duke, doors that were closed often opened when his title was mentioned, and that had been the case with Lady Winterbourne. The moment that his friend, the Earl of Rushton, had mentioned that the Duke of Barton was looking to wed, he'd received a personal invite to this house party.

And Rushton had been kind enough to enlighten him about the sisters.

Each had a sizable dowry. Each wished to wed posthaste now that they were done mourning. Something about their brother's burden as the new earl.

He winced, understanding how loss might shape a person.

The guest list had clearly been curated to include gentlemen in need of a quick match. All here in one place so they might meet the Earl of Evans' marriageable sisters.

He also knew that Lady Sophie was the oldest and most eager to wed of the lot. Rushton himself didn't care which sister he ended up with, as long as one of them filled his earldom's coffers. Which meant that Raith was completely free to pursue any of the sisters that took his fancy.

A decisive man by nature, he'd already made his choice. Raith preferred Lady Sophie for a myriad of reasons.

He looked down into her warm brown eyes, a bit wide, as her lips parted as well, the bottom one trembling just a touch. Anticipation or fear?

She'd nothing to fear from him.

Despite his reputation, he'd given up his wayward tendencies years prior. He'd just fed the rumors to keep the reputation. His life was much easier without a constant parade of marriage-minded mamas thrusting their daughters in his direction.

He'd not properly considered how that reputation might impact

his ability to actually wed when the time came.

And the time had come.

At two and thirty, it had likely passed.

But his mother's last wish had been that he wed, and he'd not disappoint her. At least not again.

He was here to do as his mother had bid. And Sophie was his choice. Her age was the first reason he'd chosen Sophie. He didn't want a fresh-faced girl still in her teens. He needed a woman who'd seen a bit of the world. And Sophie had. Which led him to his second reason, she'd had some experience with rakes.

He might not have been in town during her first season, but he'd heard the gossip upon his return. The moment he'd heard Rushton mention her name, it all came back to him. She was far from a scandal, but she wasn't so very wet behind the ears, either. A fact he appreciated.

He didn't wish to woo or cajole, and that was what most of the ladies of the *ton* seemed to expect from a gentleman. As if having the title and fortune wasn't enough, these simpering debutantes seemed to require courting as well. He didn't have the time or inclination for that sort of thing.

He was hoping to find a pragmatic young lady, but even he had been caught off guard by just how practical Sophie had been.

All the better, as far he was concerned.

But, he'd discovered other reasons she was the right choice now that she stood in front of him. Her height for one. Small thing, he knew, but as a man who was exceedingly tall, he liked a woman who matched him in stature.

And then there were her curves.

His lips quirked into a slight grin as his gaze skimmed down her again. He'd not expected her to be so well endowed. Her figure was a delight.

As was her face. Even in the dim candlelight he could see her blush as she watched him with wide, expectant eyes. Though she was clearly nervous, her gaze never dropped. She was studying him just as he studied her.

She wasn't the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. But her hair, despite its tight coif, gave the impression of barely being tamed. Her eyes were warm and kind, her lips full and thoroughly kissable. Her nose upturned in a way that kept her from being a beauty, but it lent her an air of approachability.

The sort of pretty that a man could spend a great deal of time with.

Not that he was looking for anything that resembled love. He simply wished for a woman that could be practical about this sort of thing. He'd make her a duchess and she'd provide him an heir, and their feelings could stay out of it.

That was all he asked.

Which, he'd discovered of late, was asking quite a bit when dealing with the fairer sex.

"Well," she shifted, her hands clasping together. "Did you...I mean are we...that is to say…"

His lips curved into a full smile as he reached up a hand and cupped her face. Without thought, he skimmed his thumb over her trembling lower lip. She was nervous. Which told him that her reputation with rakes was very limited, despite what the gossips had said. A relief, to be certain, but not at all surprising. In his vast experience, most rumors were either complete nonsense or wildly exaggerated. Take his own reputation. Most of it was simply false, not that he'd cared.

But if she didn't have much experience, why had she agreed to kiss him then?

He'd been mostly jesting about the kiss. She'd seemed so eager to seal the deal, that it had been too easy to suggest. And, if he were being honest, he was testing her resolve a bit. She'd passed. And now that she'd agreed to kiss him, no matter how apprehensively, he meant to see it through. It was a test of different kind, one in compatibility.

He moved closer, slowly lowering his head, his face moving closer to hers.

He watched her pupils dilate, her breath coming out in short gasps. He wrapped his other hand about her waist, pulling her abdomen closer to his. "Settle," he softly whispered as though he were speaking to a scared animal. Her hands came to his chest. At first she seemed to resist closeness, but then her fingers flexed against his muscles and her arms went limp.

Victory sang in his veins as he closed the distance between them.

He hadn't expected to like this so much. They'd hardly touched, hadn't even kissed yet and he already felt...a connection. Invisible cords tying them together.

When had he ever experienced such a sensation?

She let out a breath, the scent of spiced apples filling his nose and mouth. How could that be? They'd not been served such a dish. But it was sweet with a touch of savory tang that was intoxicating.

The sort of smell that invited a man to taste.

Which he did.

Gently, he brushed his lips against hers. A light touch meant to tease. A promise for the future and a sample of what he offered as a potential husband.

He felt her shiver of awareness at the soft graze, her fingers curling into his shirt. He flattened his hand against the delicate curve of her back. He'd meant to show her what he was capable of, but what he hadn't expected was the wave of awareness that passed through *him*.

She was an intoxicating mix of innocence and passion. He should let her go, but as he finished his quick kiss, he held her close still, looking down into her eyes, attempting to discern what had just happened.

Women did not take him by surprise.

Ever.

Her tongue darted out, wetting her lips. "I...that was…" Her mouth closed again and she swallowed.

"Lovely," he said without forethought. And then he eased back. Holding her any longer would be indecent, and he'd likely already crossed that line. An indecent duke. That's what they called him in the salons of London.

All the more reason to marry a woman he needn't explain his reputation to. He was tired of explaining himself. It seemed he'd been either explaining or rebelling his entire life.

She gave a tentative nod, but a small smile touched her lips. "Unexpected." With a shaky breath, she took a step back. "We should return before we're missed."

It was on the tip of his tongue to object. They were both here for the express purpose of marriage, and this initial interview had gone exceedingly well.

What could possibly go wrong now?

But it was best to take a safer course of action. Not always his strength, but one he would try to adhere to for the duration of their courtship.

With a reluctant nod, he offered up his elbow.

And that's when the opening strains of a waltz filtered into the hall. He stopped again, half turning toward her. "Since we're getting to know one another in an expedient fashion, would you care to dance?"

Her lips parted, her head cocking to the side as she gave him an appraising stare before she inclined her chin in agreement.

He scanned her face again, her features seeming to grow more pleasing with each passing moment. It was the subtle pink of her cheeks, the dark fringe of lashes, the single curl that had fallen from her coif, revealing that his earlier theory about her hair had been true.

He reached down to her wrist, lifting her delicately boned arm, and reaching for her dance card, wrote in his name.

Then, he offered his elbow once again.

They slipped into the ballroom, several couples already spinning about the dance floor as the small orchestra played in one corner.

It was not lost on Raith that the guest list was disproportionately male. There were some married women, a few wallflowers sprinkled in for good measure, but he knew that Lady Sophie's dance card was likely to be filled for the evening while his would be decidedly blank.

He could dance with one of her sisters, he supposed, but that didn't interest him in the least.

He'd made his choice, one that, thus far, he was exceedingly happy with.

His mother would have been happy too.

She'd have liked Sophie with her kind eyes and her gentle way.

His father wasn't likely to have had an opinion. He'd reserved all his judgment, when he'd been alive, for his only son.

And Raith had taken great delight in needling the man right back. In fact, it had defined most of his young adult years.

Right up to his father's death.

He led Lady Sophie to an open spot on the dance floor, and placing his hand at her waist, he took her small hand into his much larger grasp. With sure feet, he started the steps, leading her about the floor with the assuredness that came from years of practice. She followed without question, her gaze fixed on his.

There were no coy smiles, no brush of hips or even more intimate parts. And yet, as they moved, it seemed more of those invisible threads wrapped about him. There was a trust in her steps,

an agreed upon meaning to each of their actions. Not just an idle dance, this was a promise for the future.

More dances, more steps, more time.

He hadn't expected that to feel comforting, but it was. Even more surprising than that, their interactions were...exciting.

His pulse thrummed in his veins as they danced, moving as one.

He was aware that much of the party watched them, though that wasn't surprising. She was the eldest daughter and her family would surely wish for her to wed first so that her next sister could participate in society.

Surely that was the reason she was so practical. She wanted this business done as quickly as he did.

That thought made him appreciate her even more as he spun her again, her skirts brushing his legs as another curl fell loose from her coif.

What would that hair look like down or even only loosely pulled from her face?

He'd bet the effect would be devastating.

His fingers itched to tuck the curl behind her ear. Would the tress be silky? Soft? Would it slip through his fingers or wrap about them?

He rumbled deep in his throat as the music began to die. He wasn't ready for their dance to end. It had been a long time since he'd enjoyed one that much. Could he write his name on another spot on her card? Surely he'd be permitted two?

The music drew to an end and he stopped, still looking down at the woman in his arms. "May I be so bold as to ask for a second?"

A pretty flush colored her cheeks. "Bold. That's exactly the word I'd use to describe you."

He chuckled. "Truer words," he murmured as he reached down and filled his name into a second spot.

He resisted the urge to sign up for the very next one. He'd not set tongues wagging any more than he had already. And then he offered her his arm.

"Thank you, my lord," she said with a curtsy.

There it was again. *My lord.* She'd called him that earlier in the hallway as well. Surely as an earl's sister, she was aware that she should address him as His Grace.

Likely just a slip of the tongue. Nothing to concern himself with.

But a low tug in his gut gave him pause. It wasn't doubt—he

was still certain of his choice. But there was a hint of unease he couldn't ignore as he gazed down at her placid smile. She'd been nothing but prim and proper, which seemed at odds with her quick acceptance of his kiss.

A wry smile tugged at his lips as he shook off the thought. It seemed his bride-to-be was a bit of a conundrum, that was all. That made her all the more intriguing.

He lifted her gloved hand to his lips as they reached the edge of the dance floor, her sisters and aunt a few paces away.

Oh yes, this young lady was most intriguing indeed.

Chapter Three

"Until our next dance, my lady." The earl's low voice seemed to wrap around her in an embrace.

She swallowed hard as her heart fluttered like a hummingbird.

Goodness. And then he leaned down, those sinful lips brushing against her gloved hand.

Sophie watched him walk away as she tried to catch her breath. She must compose herself, this much she knew. Her skin prickled from all the eyes that were watching her. Watching *them*.

She drew in a deep, steadying breath as she turned to join her family.

The deep breath didn't do much good. She'd stopped twirling about the dance floor but her head was still reeling. She was dizzy with sensations and emotions too overwhelming and jumbled to name.

She lifted a hand to her lips as she sidestepped a servant to reach her sisters.

That kiss. What on earth had he done to her with that kiss? Were all kisses like that?

If so, it was no wonder they were forbidden. A young lady could lose her wits entirely from a kiss like that.

And then the dancing.

Oh goodness. Had dancing always been so divine? It might have been an age since her season in London, but she didn't recall ever feeling so light on her feet. She was certain she'd never felt so weightless and so sure of herself. They'd fallen into step with one another as though they'd been dancing together for years.

A smile quirked her lips beneath her fingers as her heart tripped over itself in happy satisfaction.

She'd certainly call this party a success, and it had only just begun.

Yes, he'd been a bit forward with the kiss, but she rather appreciated the fact that he was just as straightforward and clear in his intention to marry as she. It made the entire arrangement so much simpler.

Her smile was full-fledged when she dropped her hand and joined her sisters, aunt, and the gentleman she now recognized. He was the man with the blue jacket and longer, lighter brown hair. The gentleman whom the earl had been walking with when she'd been in pursuit.

Her smile brightened. A friend of the earl's was bound to be a friend of hers.

It was only the silence that lasted a beat too long that gave her pause as she greeted her family, awaiting an introduction to the stranger.

Was it her imagination or was there a crease of concern above Sarah's brow? And why did Samantha look so shocked as though Sophie's presence here were a total surprise?

A niggling sensation in her belly had her smile feeling forced as she looked from one seemingly stunned sister to the next, finally landing on her aunt, who wore a frozen smile that looked painted on, confusion in her eyes.

Sophie's stomach dropped. Something was wrong.

Something was very, *very* wrong.

"Sophie," her aunt said, finally breaking the tense silence. "I'm so glad you've joined us. I'd like to introduce you to the Earl of Rushton," she said. She turned to the man beside her. "He's been so eager to meet you."

Sophie's smile didn't falter. It couldn't, not when she was frozen like an ice sculpture.

"The Earl of...Rushton?" she echoed his title like an imbecile as her mind seemed to break in two.

But he couldn't be the Earl of Rushton. She'd just been dancing with the Earl of Rushton.

Hadn't she?

"At your service," he said. The gentleman's smile was kind, his handsome features inviting and warm and...not at all like the simmering, striking visage of the man she'd just been dancing with.

The man who was *not* the Earl of Rushton.

Lord Rushton gave a short bow. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Sophie."

She stared. She couldn't speak. Her mind was too busy racing with questions. Namely, if this were the Earl of Rushton, then who on earth had she just kissed?

"You'll have to forgive my sister, my lord. Sophie is rather shy,"

Serena said from beside her.

It was a blatant lie and they all knew it. She suspected even Lord Rushton heard it for the fib it was.

"Not at all," the earl said kindly, turning his gaze to her sister. "It's clear Lady Sophie has already been subjected to many introductions this evening. It must be quite overwhelming."

"Oh indeed." Their aunt was quick to leap on the earl's excuse on her behalf. "After being away from society for so long, tonight's party is sure to overwhelm these poor girls."

Sophie caught the looks of amusement her sisters shared. Poor girls, indeed. This whole party was *their* scheme. And all so they might wed.

Before we go committing to marriage, don't you think we ought to at least share a kiss first?

That deep voice rang in her ears. Her breath hitched in her lungs as horror slithered through her veins.

If that hadn't been the Earl of Rushton, and they had no understanding between them, then why had he kissed her?

She swallowed down a whimper of despair as she remembered his wicked laughter. His teasing smirk.

What kind of gentleman would kiss a lady he'd never even met?

She swallowed hard as her heart slammed against her ribcage.

What sort of lady kissed a man she hadn't been properly introduced to? Her palms grew clammy and a shiver raced down her spine. What had she done?

"...isn't that so, my lord?" Sarah was saying.

Sophie looked to her sweet, intelligent, not-at-all-socially adept younger sister. Even Sarah was doing her best to cover for Sophie's bad behavior and glaring silence.

The Earl of Rushton was here to meet Sophie. To hopefully marry her. And instead, he'd been making small talk with her sisters while she danced with another man.

Sophie straightened, trying her best to force aside thoughts of that stranger. She narrowed her eyes to concentrate on the man speaking.

The pleasant, kind man whose name she actually knew.

"And I truly appreciate your inviting my friend on such short notice," he was saying to her aunt.

"But of course," Aunt Clara trilled. "I was honored to discover the Duke of Barton had an interest in our humble little fête."

Serena made a choking sound beside her which had the earl glancing her way. Aunt Clara was many things, but a skilled actress was not one of them. And nothing about this house party was humble.

Sophie nudged her out of habit to keep her from saying anything outright. She often had to keep Serena's particular sense of humor in check.

"The Duke of Barton," Sophie murmured. Her lips felt numb as they formed the words.

So familiar, and yet so foreign. She'd heard all about him, of course. Who hadn't heard about the notorious rake? All of England was aware of his debaucherous ways.

But she'd never actually met him.

That slithering sensation was a snake in her stomach now, coiling and rising up as if ready to strike.

"Yes." Lord Rushton met her gaze evenly, and with a kindness that bordered on sympathy...or perhaps apology. "Your aunt was good enough to extend an invitation once she'd heard he would be staying at my country home this winter."

"We are delighted to have him join us," her aunt said.

"Indeed," Samantha said with a polite smile and a glance toward Sophie. "He's already proven himself an admirable dance partner."

"Not that there was a lack of eligible partners at *this* particular house party," Serena murmured with a mischievous smirk.

If Sophie wasn't mistaken, the earl's lips twitched as though he were trying not to laugh.

"Well, we could always use more," their aunt smiled broadly. "Although…" Aunt Clara turned to Sophie. "I was not aware you and His Grace were already acquainted."

Sophie's mouth had gone bone dry. Her lips parted, but no sound came out.

If there'd been any doubt left in her mind, it was gone now. The man she'd danced with—the man she'd kissed—was the notorious Duke of Barton.

Sophie's stomach turned. She was going to be ill right here in the middle of the ballroom.

Her aunt's brow furrowed in confusion. Understandably. Sophie was more than a little confused herself.

How had this happened? Her aunt was clearly waiting for an explanation, and Sophie had none to give.

Well, you see, we weren't acquainted, but I threw myself at him, nonetheless.

Her hands trembled and she clasped them together to make it stop. But all eyes were on her, and a lie tumbled from her lips. "We are very newly acquainted," she said. "We were introduced earlier this evening."

"Ah, how wonderful," her aunt said, and her eyes were lit with a gleam of excitement.

Oh dear.

"We truly are so grateful you and His Grace could attend," she said to Lord Rushton.

Samantha said something polite along the same lines, and Sarah asked after their journey. Serena said something that made the earl and the other ladies chuckle, but Sophie couldn't make it out. Her ears were too filled with the sound of blood rushing to her head as her stomach dipped and weaved.

It couldn't be. She could not have kissed the Duke of Barton. She couldn't have danced with a notorious rake in front of this entire crowd.

A cold sweat beaded on her neck, and her bodice was suddenly far too tight.

"Are you all right?" Samantha whispered from Sarah's other side.

Sarah shifted closer to Sophie, subtly gripping her elbow in support as her aunt eyed her with clear concern.

Serena, meanwhile, had taken it upon herself to maintain the polite conversation with the earl, smiling and chattering away as if they had not a care in the world.

As though they were not all dying to find out what had possessed their sensible eldest sister to throw caution to the wind and dance with society's most infamous rake.

Sarah came to her rescue. "Sophie, I was just going to take a turn about the room. Will you join me?"

She nodded, unable to speak, but happily allowing her sister to link arms with her.

"Oh, look there!" Their aunt waved to an older woman who'd just entered the room. "I should greet Lady Summers." She gestured to Serena and Samantha. "Come, girls, I'm sure she'd be most pleased to meet you."

If their aunt was hoping to give Lord Rushton a moment to

become better acquainted with Sophie and Sarah, her plan was foiled because he promptly took his leave as well after claiming a dance with them both.

When at last they were alone, Sarah tugged on Sophie's arm. "Come," she said through a strained smile. "You look as though you'll be ill. Let us get some air."

Sophie let her sister lead her about the room, her heart hammering louder with each step. "What have I done?" she whispered when they were out of earshot of others.

"I was rather wondering the same thing," Sarah said with a curious look. "I suppose if a duke asks you to dance you cannot say no, but even so…"

She trailed off with a sigh, and Sophie grimaced.

Her sister didn't know the half of it.

"It was deucedly awkward, I'll tell you that," Sarah continued. "Aunt Clara fetched the Earl of Rushton and brought him over, obviously hoping to introduce you. When you weren't there, he was stuck talking to the three of us, and then…" Her eyes widened. "And then we look over and see you dancing with his closest friend." She lowered her voice to a hiss. "And a known rake, of all things."

"I didn't know," she started.

Sarah patted her arm. "No, of course you couldn't know that Rushton was waiting for you. It was bad timing, that's all." She leaned over and dropped her voice. "But the Duke of Barton, Sophie? Really?"

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut. "What will people say?"

Sarah was quiet for a long moment. Long enough to know her sister shared her fears. Sarah was far too straightforward and intelligent to try and pretend that this was not a bad start to their plan.

A very bad start.

Sophie couldn't bring herself to explain just how badly this evening had gone. Heat stung her cheeks at the memory of that kiss, and embarrassment made her insides tumble.

"I just need a moment," she said, more to herself than anything.

"Of course," Sarah murmured. With a sigh, she added, "Well, at least it's a bit of a boon, isn't it? I mean, if a duke was showing you favor, that's bound to make you even more coveted."

"Mmm." Sophie's stomach turned once more, and she pressed a

palm to her belly. Or it would make her the topic of gossip. The subject of scandal. Everything she was hoping to avoid this time around.

"He did seem awfully taken with you," Sarah continued, her tone slow and thoughtful. "Do you suppose he's interested in you? To marry, I mean? I know they say he's vowed never to marry, but perhaps he's had a change of heart now that he's getting on in years."

Was that the case?

Had he genuinely been interested in her?

Sarah's heart twisted and leapt. She drew in a deep breath at the memory of his kiss. His words were coming back to her and everything he'd said took on a new meaning now. But all that left her with was flaming cheeks, a fluttering pulse, and more questions than ever.

Sarah squeezed her arm. "Sophie?"

She turned to see Sarah watching her with concern. "I do not know what he meant by it, Sarah. I truly do not know."

Chapter Four

Raith stood in the corner near the garden doors as he watched the scene before him. Candles glowed all about them, the decorations sparkling in the low light. It was a lovely scene, magical even, but scenery did not fill his evening. He likely had an hour before his next dance with Sophie.

He wasn't much for idle time, and he shifted his weight as he drew in a deep breath. Would it be odd if he left to attend the ledgers he'd brought with him?

Probably.

"I see you wasted no time in choosing one of the Maxwell ladies for your own," Rushton said as he came to stand next to him.

Raith looked over at his longtime friend. They'd been chums at Oxford, both just the heirs then, sent to school to learn to be men and leaders. But while they shared the same goals, they'd had opposite families. While Raith had a cold and sometimes cruel father, Rushton's had been kind, loving, and supportive of his son.

How Raith had envied Rush that. Not that his father had been all bad. The duke had done one thing well. Managing his assets. The one skill that Rush's father had completely lacked. Raith sighed. They all had a cross to bear. "And you wasted no time with an introduction to all the sisters."

Rush lifted his brows. "True."

Raith turned to face his friend. "Were you looking to wed Lady Sophie specifically? I assumed from our conversation that you hadn't any particular leaning in terms of which sister you courted."

"Also true," Rush said. "I care not that you are pursuing Lady Sophie. I am just curious about your haste in choosing your future bride."

Raith lifted a shoulder. "I see little point in drawing out the process. Besides, I don't see you dallying either."

Rush quirked a brow. "I have a very good reason to make a match as quickly as I am able. My father's creditors are very nearly banging down my door. For what purpose are you rushing?"

What purpose, indeed?

Raith winced as he looked down at his carefully folded hands. *For the purpose of trickery*. What would Rush think if Raith actually said those words aloud? He'd need to catch Lady Sophie before she saw under his carefully crafted veneer. "You already know. I have need of a wife, so I've decided to wed. There is no reason to delay."

Rush stepped closer, his expression solemn. "I was sorry to hear about your mother."

"Thank you." Raith ground his teeth together. How had Rush hit so close to the truth? They were men. They rarely talked of feelings and certainly not to other men. At least not without having heavily imbibed. He'd never outright explained to his friend that his mother's parting wish was that he wed, but it seemed Raith knew him well enough to understand.

His mother had only wanted one thing. For him to settle. To start a family. To move on from the cruelty and misery that had filled their home while their father lived.

His mother had given him so much and had never asked for anything in return. How could he deny her this one request?

He couldn't. It was as simple as that.

He still didn't relish the idea of marriage, but Raith could console himself with one fact. Whatever her reasons, Lady Sophie was of the same mind. She was also eager to make a quick match that didn't involve a great deal of discussion on the topic of feelings, or past hurts. She didn't wish for them to bare their souls to one another and discover all the little hidden truths and concealed wounds that he'd spent his life covering. A great relief to be certain.

Besides, he was a duke. Dukes didn't explain themselves to anyone. It was one of the many benefits to being in such a powerful position.

Rush turned to face him even as Raith continued to stare straight out into the ballroom. He didn't want to look at his friend, didn't want to betray the ache that had settled in his gut.

"If you ever need to talk…"

"Rush," his jaw clenched so hard, a dull pounding started in his forehead. "When have I ever wanted to talk?"

Rush laughed at that, and a bit of Raith's tension eased. "I know. Believe me, I know. But losing your parents...especially your mother, it's different."

Yes, he supposed it was. But not different enough to make him

actually discuss it. No. He was going to do as she asked and marry a perfectly respectable girl and then make an heir before the relationship turned completely sour.

They always did. He was too much like his father for it to be any other way. “There is nothing to say.”

Rush stared at him, his arms crossing. “Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

Rush shifted, still staring at Raith’s profile. “Well, I have something to say. I’m angry.”

Raith gave a quarter turn, his mouth parting in surprise. “What?”

Rush crossed his arms. “Furious, actually, though it’s hard to admit.”

Raith’s head jerked back. “With me?”

Rush scowled. “No, of course not with you. I’m vexed by the situation in which I’ve found myself.”

Raith’s mouth opened and closed and then opened again as he searched for a proper response. First, because anger was still a feeling and he preferred not to discuss those, a fact Raith knew well. This was a mutual understanding between him and Rush to not focus on silly things like emotion. “All right.”

Rush shook his head. “So it’s not just your feelings, but mine too, that you do not wish to discuss?”

“Precisely.”

“Why did you think I’d be angry at you?” Rush asked.

Raith turned fully to his friend. “I thought perhaps you decided you wanted Lady Sophie for yourself. I quite understand if you do. There is something special about her, though it wasn’t apparent at first blush.” Raith arched his brows. “If you’ve changed your mind and decided you want her for yourself, I’d understand.”

Rush studied him with a furrowed brow as if Raith were speaking in tongues. “What’s different about discussing who courts Sophie versus what I’m attempting to share?”

Raith looked up, watching the slow drip of wax from a candle nearby. “I suppose needing to wed is a problem. One to which there is a possible solution. But feelings, those never seem to mend themselves. But we go on anyway, don’t we?”

He watched Rush’s shoulders slump. “To that end, I can’t argue.”

And then Raith felt a pang of guilt. Rush had attempted to be a good friend and ask after him. And what had he done? Shut him

down at every turn. This is how he pushed people away. And he didn't want to lose Rush. The man was one of the few true friends he had left. Swallowing a lump of disdain, he drew in a cleansing breath as he prepared to do the unthinkable. Ask after the man's emotional health. "Why are you angry then?"

Rush shrugged. "My mother and father were so deeply in love they forgot to care about anyone else. Even me."

That made Raith's mouth drop open in surprise. He'd never considered it that way, but now that Rush had said the words out loud, they made sense. His parents had been completely wrapped up in one another. But they'd seemed to love Rush too. "But I saw them with you. They were affectionate and kind."

Rush nodded. "And they spent every last penny on expensive trips and lavish seasons."

Raith pulled his chin back. He would have been angry too.

"They showed me a great love and took away my chance at ever finding it."

Raith shook his head, his own gut twisting on behalf of his friend. "That is truly awful."

Rush nodded. "I'm sharing this with you because I want you to know that you can share with me too. We don't have to cry or yell or lament our fates, but sometimes, just saying things out loud eases the ache."

Raith turned away again, a frown settling over his mouth. Would that help? Did he break his own code and share his feelings with his longtime friend? His head shook back and forth as he rubbed his forehead with his fingers. Oddly enough, he was tempted. Since his mother's passing, he'd been feeling more and more weighted.

"Barton," a male voice said from behind him. "What are you doing here?"

Raith's frown deepened as he turned to see Lord Sexton and Lord Andrews making their way toward him and Rush. Both were men he'd been friendly with after he'd finished school but before he'd taken on the title.

They'd been fun and a bit wild.

But whereas Raith had aged out of that behavior, they still engaged often. And he'd guess both were in need of an infusion of coin and were now looking to marry. Which was why they were here now. "Same as you, I'd reckon." His lip curled in a bit of

distaste as he stared at them. They'd gone soft, literally. Years of drink and fine food had turned them doughy.

But he found them distasteful for another reason too. Where Rush needed coin to mend a broken title, and he just wished for an arrangement without emotion, these men wanted to feed their bottomless appetites.

Sexton, the taller, darker man gave him a grin as he gave the sisters on the far side of the room a meaningful glance. "I was never much for hunting, but I must confess, I'm looking forward to this one."

The very idea that this man would hunt Sophie sent bile rising up into his mouth.

Rush cleared his throat. "There are a lot of very eligible gentlemen here. While there is more than one fox, the chances are limited."

Andrews chuckled. "It makes the victory even greater, doesn't it?"

Sexton elbowed his friend. "And then there is the best part. To the victor goes the spoils."

Raith's hand clenched against his side. Under the best of circumstances, he didn't like spending time with these men. How had he ever enjoyed their company? His fingers relaxed a bit. The answer was simple enough. He'd been looking to intentionally irritate his father and these men had helped him with that task nicely.

Of course, now they were irritating *him*.

"Which sister are you interested in, Rushton?" Andrews asked, leaning closer to give Rush a good jab with his elbow. "The youngest sure is a pretty dish, isn't she?"

Rush shrugged. "I hadn't noticed."

Andrews chuckled conspiratorially as he leaned closer, dropping his voice. "The oldest one is tall. I like a tall woman, it's better for the…" And then he gave a garish wink.

Energy coursed through Raith like lightning, and both his hands curled into tight balls of fury. "Enough."

Sexton slapped him on the back as though it were all a great joke. "Not to worry, old chap. We saw you dancing with the eldest, we know you've already laid some claim. We shall wait to pursue her until you've had your fun."

Had his fun? Had the man gone mad? These were respectable

ladies, not tavern wenches. Not even a duke, were he at all inclined, which he was not, would abuse women like the Maxwell sisters in such a way.

But of course, Andrews and Sexton did not know that about him because he rarely shared his thoughts or feelings with anyone.

But he gave them a healthy glare, drawing to his full height, as he stared down at first Sexton and then Andrews. “You’re clearing the field for my hunt, are you?”

Andrews took a half step back. “Of course, Your Grace.”

His gaze narrowed. “I’m just another predator. A dragon swooping down and plucking up some village girl for my pleasure. I’ll just take Lady Sophie back to my lair and consume her for breakfast, shall I? Once done, then I’ll toss her aside.”

Uncomfortable chuckles came from the men around him, but beyond that, a faint gasp behind him and then the rustle of skirts. Had some lady overheard his crass statement? He winced in regret. It hadn’t been meant to offend some lady’s ears but to shame these two men into better behavior by demonstrating the crassness of their attitudes.

His words did have the intended effect. “Your Grace,” Sexton said with an uncertain smile. “You know we meant no offense.”

“Oh no, of course not,” Andrews said, though he was still chuckling, as though this was all a joke.

Raith drew in a deep breath, filling his chest. “Do you know the thing about dragons? They breathe fire.” His lip curled. “Careful. When they’re on the hunt, you never know who might get burned.”

“Yo-your Grace?” Sexton stammered.

“We’re all friends here, Your Grace,” Andrews said, his palms up as if he just now realized that perhaps Raith’s disdain was in earnest.

“I can’t tell you to leave. It’s not my party. But you’ll stay away from the Maxwell sisters, or you’ll face me.” Then he leaned in. “And my fire.”

Andrews actually stumbled back, like the soft, lily-livered coward that he was. Sexton followed, and he watched as the two men retreated across the ballroom.

“Really?” Rush said, crossing his arms. “A dragon?”

Raith shrugged.

“For a man that doesn’t wish to discuss his feelings, you’ve got quite the flair for the dramatic.”

“You ought to be thanking me.” Raith gave his friend a wicked grin. “I just cleared two of your competitors from the field.”

Rush did smile at that. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He searched the crowd, looking for a glimpse of Lady Sophie among the sea of men blocking his view. “If you’ll excuse me, I think I shall start a circle about the ballroom. I don’t want to be late for my dance, and the crowd is thick.”

Rush gave a nod. “Of course. I am going to attempt to find Lady Winterbourne. I think she’ll have real insight into which sister I’d do best to focus my attention.”

“Happy hunting,” he said by way of jest.

Rush looked at the ceiling before he started in the opposite direction.

Raith began his slow push through the crowd. The only silver lining of speaking to those two buffoons was that it had eaten up a half hour of his evening. Which meant in just another half hour, he’d be holding Sophie in his arms again.

Strange.

He wanted a quick match without emotion clouding the waters. But he couldn’t quite deny that Sophie already stirred one feeling inside him. Excitement.

But this realization brought another emotion hot on its heels—wariness. Excitement was all well and good, just so long as it didn’t lead to anything more.

It was like opening a door a crack and hoping the wind wouldn’t push it wide. One emotion could lead to many more. And if it did, how would he hold them back?

Chapter Five

Sophie's lips were numb and her stomach weighted with horror. "A dragon," she muttered under her breath.

Sarah squeezed her arm. "Perhaps we misunderstood."

But a quick glance at her sister showed that Sarah was just as horrified by what they'd overheard as she was.

No. No one could be more horrified than she.

Nor had any lady in all of England been more foolish. She squeezed her eyes shut tight as they drew to a stop in an alcove that kept them hidden from the room at large. They couldn't hide in here forever, but Sophie needed a moment—just one—to sort through this jumbled mix of emotions.

"Sophie?" Sarah said.

Sophie opened her eyes to see Sarah peering at her through narrowed eyes. It was the look she wore when she was trying to read one of her mathematics texts without her spectacles.

"Are you all right?" Sarah asked.

"Of course." She slid her palms over the silk of her skirts to try and regain her composure.

"If it helps, I don't believe he was in earnest," Sarah offered, her features tight with sympathy and concern. "I'm almost certain he was jesting."

Sophie winced, her mind's eye calling up that wicked laughter in his eyes, the amusement in his tone when they'd talked, the way he'd teased her into a kiss…

"Oh, I am certain he was in jest," Sophie agreed. "This is all a joke to him."

Emotions welled up so hard and fast, it stole her breath. She covered her eyes with a hand looking toward the ground in an attempt to both gain control of this emotional tide welling inside her and to hide her struggle from her sister's watchful stare.

It was humiliation, plain and simple. It was embarrassment, and regret, and, if she were being totally honest with herself—betrayal.

Which was ridiculous. She barely knew the man. He couldn't betray her. One needed to trust someone before that trust could be

betrayed.

She took a deep steadying breath, trying not to recall those dreadful words. *I'll just take Lady Sophie back to my lair and consume her for breakfast, shall I? Once done, then I'll toss her aside.*

He was most definitely in jest—and he'd made her the object of his joke. Her hands trembled as her hand slid down her face to cover her mouth.

One day in, and this house party was already a disaster. She'd made a mess of everything. She'd kissed the wrong man, danced for all the world to see with a notorious rake, and been laughed at by a rogue and the very man she was meant to marry.

She let out a shaky breath at the memory of Rushton's rueful chuckle as he'd shaken his head in the sort of indulgent laugh men used with one another. A lifetime of living under the same roof as Tobias had left her well acquainted with that sort of masculine humor.

"He's made a fool of me," Sophie whispered.

Sarah's brow furrowed even further, but she didn't insult Sophie's intelligence by trying to tell her otherwise.

They'd both been there. They'd heard him laughing with his friends.

Had he told Rushton about that kiss?

Yes. Yes, he must have. And it was now abundantly clear that he'd known precisely who she was when she approached. And what was more—he must have known that she'd mistaken him for the earl.

She shook her head as memories washed over her, bits and pieces of their conversation taking on new meaning and significance. *My lord.* She'd called him 'my lord' several times and he hadn't corrected her. He'd known that she hadn't recognized him as the duke.

She squeezed her eyes shut once more. "Sarah, what am I to do?"

"We'll come up with a new plan. There are plenty of eligible men here. We'll just go back to the list and start over."

Sarah's tone was soothingly practical and Sophie dropped her hand with a nod and a sigh. "You're right. We'll come up with a new plan."

They had to. Her family needed her to marry, whether they wanted to admit it or not.

“Come.” Sarah tucked a hand under her elbow and nudged her back toward the end of the ballroom where they’d left her aunt and sisters. “Let us talk to Aunt Clara. Perhaps she can give us guidance. And we really ought to warn Serena and Samantha about those callous knaves.”

“You’re right,” Sophie said with a sniff. “I wouldn’t want anyone else caught up in their wicked games.”

Sarah shook her head. “I don’t suppose I will ever understand young men. I know Tobias’s friends have a reputation for being irresponsible, but at least our brother has a good head on his shoulders.”

Sophie nodded, her spine straightening as they drew closer to Samantha and Serena, who were standing with their heads close together, their Aunt Clara beside them, watching the crowd with a satisfied smile.

What would her aunt say if Sophie told her that the great Duke of Barton had played a cruel joke on her?

She winced at the thought. No. She couldn’t tell Aunt Clara—at least, not everything. Her aunt had worked so hard for their benefit, and as long as no one learned of the kiss, Sophie would be fine. But she might have to tell her to reconsider the Earl of Rushton as their first choice. Any man who could be friends with His Grace deserved to be scrutinized.

“We’ll all figure this out together,” Sarah said as she used her free hand to pat Sophie’s arm. “You’ll see.”

She nodded. “I’m sure you’re right. I’m not about to let His Grace ruin all our plans just because he’s bored and in need of amusement.”

“What about the Duke of Barton?” Aunt Clara asked.

Sarah shot her an amused look. “Nothing, Aunt Clara.”

For a lady of such advanced years, their aunt had impeccable hearing. Sophie’s brows drew down as she remembered Aunt Clara pointing out the Earl of Rushton. She’d said he was wearing black, but Rushton was clearly wearing blue.

She bit back a sigh. What did it matter? It wasn’t as though she could blame her aunt for her mistake. One thing was certain, though. Her aunt’s hearing might have been perfect, but her eyesight left something to be desired.

“The room is still buzzing about your dance with the duke,” Aunt Clara said as she and Sophie’s sisters crowded around them.

“Yes, about that,” Sophie started.

But she wasn’t given a chance to finish. “Lady Sophie.”

That voice. So low, so familiar. It sent a shiver down her spine. Sophie stiffened, that shiver turning to ice in her veins as she turned slowly to face the man who’d stolen her first kiss. The man who’d tricked her.

The man who’d made a fool of her.

Her chin came up in defiance as he turned those laughing eyes on her. What nerve. Did he think she was still confused about who he was? Or did he simply not care that his little trick had come to light.

“Your Grace?” she said the words, but her cool tone implied all her meaning. He wasn’t welcome in this conversation. “Is there something you require?”

He arched a brow, but that amusement was still there, in his eyes and in his smirk.

She ignored her aunt’s gasp and Serena and Samantha’s wide-eyed, questioning stares. Sarah gripped her elbow harder as if in support, but Sophie didn’t need it.

Anger had replaced humiliation and fury burned away the last of that ridiculous betrayal.

How dare he?

He might have been a duke, but she was an earl’s sister. And this was her aunt’s home. She’d done nothing to deserve his disrespect nor his unkindness.

His lips quirked up at the corners as he regarded her. “Have you forgotten me so quickly? What a pity. If memory serves, I have the honor of your next dance.” His gaze dropped to her dance card. “Fortunately for me, I put it in writing.”

Aunt Clara’s laughter, bright and nervous, filled the air between them. “Of course Sophie didn’t forget. Did you, Sophie?”

Sophie stared up at this man who’d dared to kiss her for sport. She couldn’t bring herself to respond for fear of what she might say.

Something cutting, definitely. But she didn’t trust herself not to burst into angry tears, or worse—slap the man and cause a spectacle all of London would be talking about for years to come. So instead, she stared as she clenched her hands into fists at her sides.

“I understand you met my eldest niece earlier this evening, but allow me to introduce her sisters,” Aunt Clara was saying.

For a moment he didn't look away, his gaze locked on hers as a line formed over his brow. A flicker of confusion or wariness tinged his smile before he finally looked away to say a polite greeting to each of her sisters.

Sophie took the opportunity to take deep, fortifying breaths as she scrambled to come up with an excuse. She leaned over to Sarah. "Can I refuse to dance?"

Sarah gave her a sympathetic grimace. "You know you cannot. Not without seeming unbearably rude."

Sophie widened her eyes. Was he not unbearably rude? Would it not be well deserved?

But she relented with a huff. Her aunt would be horrified if she were to be so rude to a guest—and a duke, no less.

"Well, Lady Sophie?" He turned to her, and she could have sworn she saw a challenge in his eyes as he held out a hand for hers. "Shall we?"

Another waltz. The man had chosen another waltz. Just to torture her, no doubt.

She gritted her teeth and slid her gloved hand into the crook of his elbow, her chin so high she had to look down her nose to meet his gaze. "Very well."

She ignored her aunt's sharp inhale at her lack of decorum, and the whispers between Sarah and her other sisters as they walked away. When they drew close to the dance floor, she heard his low voice murmur, "Lady Sophie, might I ask, is anything amiss?"

Her blood boiled with rage. She clenched her teeth. Oh, but he was a cad. He was toying with her, teasing her, prodding her for his own amusement. "Why would you think that?"

He glanced down at her with an arched brow but didn't answer.

And then he couldn't have answered because the music swelled and the couples around them surged forward to claim a spot on the dance floor. She let him pull her into his arms, and just like last time, they moved as one and he led them about the floor with a grace and deftness that made her want to spit.

As if it wasn't bad enough that he was a powerful duke, or that he was handsome as sin—he had to be an excellent dancer as well.

It was too much.

Especially for a man who clearly had no heart. But perhaps that was the exchange he'd made. Perhaps he'd sold his soul to the devil for all this power, wealth, and prestige.

“I would give a fortune to know what you’re thinking right now.” His voice had her glancing up from the crease in his cravat where she’d been determinedly fixing her glare since being hauled into his arms for this unwanted dance.

“I don’t believe you’d like to hear my thoughts near as much as you believe,” she said through a tight jaw.

He arched a brow again, that dratted amusement making his dark eyes glimmer in the candlelight. “Try me.”

Her nostrils flared as she struggled for calm. It would not do to rant and rave in public, and it would only harm her reputation and her family’s by extension. She drew in a deep breath. “I was thinking about Faust.”

Both brows hitched up slightly. “I see.”

He clearly didn’t, but she was not about to explain her theories that he’d sold his soul. Somehow, she just knew he’d find it amusing. And she’d given him enough to laugh about this evening. The thought had her looking away with a sniff.

“Lady Sophie,” he said slowly. “Have I done something wrong?”

She whipped her head back around so quickly it left her reeling. It didn’t help that he was currently spinning her in circles about the room.

“Have you done something *wrong*?” she repeated. Did he think she still didn’t know?

Did he truly believe her so daft and so gullible?

She gulped as a wave of humiliation swallowed her. Of course he did. She’d let him kiss her, for heaven’s sake. She’d let a stranger take liberties because she was that desperate for a husband.

His brow furrowed with a frown. “If I have made a mistake—”

“Oh no, it is I who made the mistake,” she said on a rush of air. “I am the one who mistook you for a gentleman.”

His eyes widened in surprise, and she couldn’t miss the anger that flashed in his eyes. “Pardon me?”

The couple dancing next to them looked over just then and she felt their curious stares.

Drat.

She was causing a scene. Or she would cause a scene if she exercised her temper now. She drew in a deep breath, forced a smile she did not feel, and tried her best to sound sincere. “My apologies, *Your Grace*.” The way she stressed his title had his eyes narrowing slightly. “What I meant to say was, I mistook you for

another gentleman earlier."

As you must very well know. She clamped her mouth shut to bite back those words.

"I see." The laughter in his eyes was gone so quickly it left her reeling all over again. The new coldness in his eyes had the ice creeping back through her veins. "So your talk of marriage and allowing me to kiss you…"

"I thought you were someone else." She couldn't hide the anger that no doubt flared in her eyes. "As I suspect you knew."

She added the last part softly, nearly under her breath. But he heard her.

His gaze burned into her. Her cheeks felt like they were scorched by flames and Sophie was acutely aware of the dancers around them. They were staring. They were whispering.

As they had been before, but during that last dance she'd been so pleased with herself. So pleased with him.

"You believe I *knew* you thought you were kissing another man?" His mild tone was at odds with the cold fury in his eyes.

"Didn't you?" she shot back.

The change in him was sudden. One moment his attention was fixed on her, his demeanor intense and his gaze fierce. And the next he was a cool, composed brick wall. Detached and emotionless. Completely at odds with the man who'd kissed her with such tender passion, and another man entirely from the one who'd glared daggers at her just a moment ago.

"Then it seems we were both mistaken," he said. "Neither of us is who the other thought."

Her head jerked back. Despite his cool, emotionless tone she felt the words like a slap. Why did it feel like he was accusing her of some tomfoolery in return? As if she'd set out to trick him like he'd fooled her.

For a moment she wanted to argue in her defense. She wanted to ask him what he'd meant. But then she thought of his callous tone as he'd joked with his friends.

About her.

About ruining her reputation.

She kept her chin high, despite the fact that her cheeks burned and the stares of those around her felt like poison on her skin. "It would appear that way, Your Grace," she said with all the cool composure she could muster. When would this miserable dance be

over?

Chapter Six

Raith lay in bed with his arm tossed over his eyes. What time was it? It seemed as though he'd been awake half the night, but he must have fallen back to sleep at some point. Still, it was early, he'd reckon by the grey light that filtered into his room.

Pushing back the covers, he rose from the bed. Staring at the clock on the mantel, he realized that it was actually quite late. Where had the morning gone and why did it still appear so dark outside?

The ball had ended in complete disaster. He snorted as he scrubbed his hands through his hair. What an understatement that was. To be fair, the ball might have ended very well. His evening, however, had unraveled in a blink, and he still didn't quite understand why.

He stretched, rubbing his eyes. That was what he got for attempting to woo a woman in less than an hour.

He didn't know her nor understand her. And she clearly didn't understand him either. Which was for the best.

Even his mother, who loved him more than any other person in this whole world, had reservations about his character. Who could blame her? He was so like his father, the man she'd married. It was no secret she'd spent the rest of her life regretting the match.

He winced in pain to think of her words. *You're so like him. Be careful not to waste your future on bitterness and resentment. Marry quickly and make an heir.*

He knew what she hadn't said. Marry quickly before she realizes cruelty and anger are in your blood. Marry quickly before she realizes you'll make a terrible husband.

How could he blame his mother for thinking that? He was emotionally distant like his father, prone to long silences and, just like he'd demonstrated with Andrews and Sexton, fits of temper. Who wanted that in a husband, duke or no?

Judging by Lady Sophie's irritation, she'd discerned his true nature and she didn't like it. Perhaps she'd heard the rumors and changed her mind or…

But she'd called him *my lord*. Twice during that first dance.

Perhaps she really had believed him to be someone else. Was that possible?

If it was, she likely thought him a complete cad for kissing her. He replayed their conversation, the one where he insisted no introductions were necessary, and then he groaned into his hands. No wonder she'd felt tricked.

Perhaps he needed his solicitor to arrange a match for him. Because clearly, he was incapable of doing it himself. He shook his head. He was a duke, and he *still* couldn't get a woman to commit to him. His mother had been right.

He was that unlikable.

Wincing, he crossed to the windows. Regardless of the *why,* Lady Sophie had clearly rejected him.

Which meant this house party was a waste of his time. He had little need or desire for merriment, and if he was no longer hunting for a bride, what was the point of staying here?

Once he was dressed, he'd order his carriage brought round and take his leave. He'd eliminate another candidate for Rush. Perhaps he should stay to help his friend. But his gut twisted at the thought of the glaring he'd have to endure from Lady Sophie.

Whatever she'd discovered about him, it had made her spitting mad. He did tend to have that effect on women.

Another reason to allow his solicitor to arrange a marriage.

Sighing, he pushed back the curtains, secure in his plan to leave before he managed to do any more damage.

But Mother Nature had other ideas.

As he parted the curtains wide, and stared out into the grey morning, he couldn't help but note a fresh blanket of powder covering the ground. Thick and white, it was as beautiful as it was cruel.

He was trapped.

His carriage wouldn't be going anywhere today.

With a long sigh, he turned toward the door and pulled the bell cord to call for his valet. He might as well go down to breakfast. With any luck he wouldn't see Sophie at all, but if he did, he'd have to be cordial. Surely he could do that for a meal. Whatever other activities they had planned, he'd bow out gracefully and spend the day working on the ledgers. Hopefully, by tomorrow morning, enough of the snow would be gone that he could leave.

But his plan began to go wrong the moment he stepped into the dining room. All eyes turned to him, and conversation seemed to stop.

Worse still, standing by the buffet was Lady Sophie, her accusatory glare the coldest of them all. He'd be warmer rolling about in the snow.

Straightening his shoulders, he met her gaze head on and gave her a short nod, his best attempt at civility. Surely one kiss didn't require such vitriol.

Especially when he could only muster regret for whatever misunderstanding had led them to this. He drew in a long breath, realizing he felt something else too. Appreciation. While her eyes still held a wary resentment, her shoulders were straight and her head high. She was as lovely as she was strong, and a third emotion stirred in his chest. It was affection.

He *liked* her.

All of that on top of the attraction bubbling under the surface. That was a great deal of feeling to experience in a single morning.

She returned the gesture before spinning about so that he was staring at her back.

"Good morning," Rush said from his left.

He resisted the urge to mumble, *what's good about it*, and instead nodded in reply, his eyes still on Sophie's back.

"Sleep well?" Rush tried again.

He grumbled something unintelligible as he started toward the buffet laden with all sorts of breakfast delights. Eggs Florentine, ham, scones, and assorted pastries were laid out before the guests. He'd eat well, at least.

Rush followed behind him, tapping on the shoulder. "Are you trying for sullen?"

"It comes naturally," he snapped back.

Rush sighed. "I'm aware your second dance with Lady Sophie didn't go very well."

That made Raith spin about. Gossip was just what he needed to make this disastrous morning worse. "Who said that?"

"I did. I saw the two of you. You both looked like you were chewing on wood."

Raith winced at that, and he rubbed his forehead, trying to ease the ache that had already begun throbbing. "I can have that effect on people."

Rush shook his head. “You are being too hard on yourself, as usual.”

That was a kind thing to say and Raith relaxed a bit at the words. “Thank you.”

“Now, tell me what happened.”

Raith paused, drawing up straighter. Telling Rush what had transpired was a great deal like sharing feelings. Which he didn’t do. But perhaps if he just told his friend the facts. “We had an interaction in the hall prior to our first dance. I thought we had an understanding, she thought I was someone else. What’s worse, she thinks I deliberately tricked her.” There, it was out. Except for the kiss, of course. He’d not divulge that and risk her reputation.

Rush squinted at him, his brows drawing together. “But when she was introduced to you, who introduced her?”

Raith winced. This was why he didn’t share. He’d already revealed a mistake to his friend. He hadn’t waited for a formal introduction.

Rush must have understood. “Worry not. Anything you tell me is safe. I’ll guard Lady Sophie’s reputation as I would my own sister’s.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. I’ve never been particularly good at abiding by the rules.”

Rush stepped forward, his voice dropping. “I know. Which is why you might consider your former reputation. The one you do nothing to dissuade. Coupled with an unsolicited meeting. The lady might think…” Rush dropped his voice even further. “She might think your motives are less than honorable.”

Raith’s chin drew back. “But we talked of marriage.”

Rush raised a shoulder. “Do you know how many rakes have lured an innocent woman into a trap with the offer of marriage? My guess is a great many.”

His jaw dropped. With men like Sexton and Andrews going on about his past, it was a very easy misassumption to make.

He looked over at Lady Sophie again. Her head was bent with her sisters, even as her gaze continued to scan the crowd. Her hands twisted together. She was worried. About what? Surely not him.

With a cleansing breath, he realized it was good that the snow had kept him here. He needed to speak with her today. There was likely no repairing the damage that had been done, but perhaps he owed her an apology and an explanation.

He wouldn’t have to share too much to accomplish that, would

he?

But after last night, how might he even convince her to talk with him at all?

"Lady Winterbourne," Rush said with a smile, turning to face their hostess.

Raith turned too. He wasn't quite certain what to expect. Would her reception be frosty after his evening with her niece?

But her smile was warm and gracious as she greeted them. "What luck to have a snowstorm for our festivities," she gushed.

"Indeed," he answered, chuckling to himself to think that he'd had the opposite reaction.

She leaned closer to the two men. "I'm hoping to organize a group sleigh ride for this afternoon. I was hoping to count on you both to attend."

Raith hesitated. While he wished to speak with Sophie, a sleigh ride didn't quite match the heavy mood that had settled about him. But before he could refuse, Rush stepped forward.

"We'd be delighted," he answered, speaking for Raith. "And may I ask if your lovely nieces will also be in attendance?" Then his cad of a friend looked at him and gave a small wink. He glowered back.

"Of course," Lady Winterbourne gushed before she dropped her voice and shifted closer. "I haven't told them about it yet, but I'm certain they'll join in the merriment."

At least he might get the opportunity to speak with Sophie. "Thank you for thinking of us, Lady Winterbourne," he said with a bow.

"You're welcome, Your Grace," she said before taking her leave and crossing to her nieces.

He rounded on Rush, ready to give the other man a piece of his mind for his meddling. "You're worse than an old woman."

Rush waved his comment away. "You can tell me how terrible I am later. Right now, let's focus on you. When you speak with Lady Sophie this afternoon, you have to remember a few key points."

"What are those?" he rumbled, knowing full well a lecture was coming. How had that happened? How was he being chastised when Rush had just volunteered him for a small form of torture?

"No intimidation."

Raith scowled. "I do not intimidate ladies."

Rush notched a brow. "You don't *mean* to intimidate ladies. Though to be fair, Lady Sophie appeared to give as good as she got

during your second dance."

Raith smiled grudgingly at that. She had been quite strong in the face of his stony silence. Something he greatly appreciated.

"Be honest with her," Rush continued. "And try to be...approachable."

"Approachable? Have you met me?" He shook his head as he stared back at Rush.

"Try," Rush chuckled.

He gave a sigh. Approachable? Him? He was a duke, for heaven's sake. He wasn't meant to be approachable.

"This is just an apology," Raith muttered to his friend. "I don't need to win the girl's affection, merely make amends."

"Mmm." Rush's murmur of agreement sounded suspiciously like a smothered laugh.

"What?" he snapped. "What's so amusing?"

"Nothing, it's just…" Raith clapped a hand on his shoulder. "From the way Lady Sophie has been glaring in your direction every time you look away, I'd say you've finally met your match."

He gave a grunt of rueful amusement as he cast another glance in her direction. The lady's spine was ramrod straight, her chin held high.

She might have been a general in another lifetime.

Perhaps he truly had met his match—in stubbornness, at least.

He sighed. "You say that like it's a good thing."

"For you, old chap?" Rush chuckled as he moved past him toward the buffet. "It might just be a Christmastide miracle."

Chapter Seven

The way Sophie's sisters hovered about her this morning, she felt like the fox on a hunt. Determinedly *not* looking in the Duke of Barton's direction, she slid into a seat at the dining room table.

Her sisters followed a moment later.

"You needn't be concerned. I am not going to do anything untoward," she murmured as Samantha took the seat to her right and Serena sat on her left. Sarah had taken the chair directly opposite her.

Samantha patted her arm soothingly. "It's not you we're worried about."

"Of course not," Sarah said stoutly as she buttered her toast. "You might have made a mistake last night, but that was merely a misunderstanding."

"Mmm." Serena murmured her agreement around a mouthful of scone. "His actions on the other hand…"

Sophie sighed. She didn't have to look over to know that Serena had taken up glaring at His Grace now that Sophie had stopped.

She was starting to think perhaps she shouldn't have told her sisters all that had happened the night before. But after that second dance, she hadn't been able to stop herself. She'd just been so livid and keeping her temper had never been her strong suit. And so she'd dragged her sisters off to their private quarters to relate the entirety of her disastrous evening.

Later she assured herself it was better that she'd ranted and raved about the duke's bad behavior to her sisters in the privacy of her rooms rather than to the duke himself in public.

But this morning, in the cold light of day, she wasn't so certain spilling this secret had been wise. It was bad enough that she couldn't keep herself from glaring at the man in question, but now she had to worry that her sisters were going too far while coming to her defense.

"I still cannot believe he allowed you to carry on like that," Sarah said with a shake of her head. "It must have been clear to him that you believed you were addressing someone else."

Sophie nodded. How could it not have been clear? After all, everyone knew he didn't wish to marry. And then there was the matter of her repeatedly addressing him incorrectly.

"And his audacity to claim a second dance." Serena frowned in confusion. "He must have seen you talking to the Earl of Rushton. He must have known by that point that you were enlightened about his identity."

Sophie froze with a pastry between her fingers, halfway to her mouth. She swallowed hard, resisting the urge to glance in the duke's direction. What Serena had said...it was the same thought she'd been having all morning.

She'd spent the better part of last night tossing, turning, and replaying every word she'd exchanged with the Duke of Barton.

And the kiss, a tiny voice of honesty helpfully pointed out. *Don't forget the kiss.*

She took a bite of the pastry with a huff of exasperation.

Yes, all right. She'd also relived every moment of that kiss. But the more she'd replayed their conversations, the more she wondered what he'd been thinking. What had been going through his mind? Had he truly meant to fool her? Had he not thought about the potential consequences of his actions?

"For my part, I still cannot believe he *kissed* you." Samantha's dreamy sigh jolted Sophie back to the present.

"Samantha," Sarah said with a warning tone and a meaningful glance around them. Fortunately, none of the other guests were paying attention to them as they talked amongst themselves.

The only people who'd taken note of them since they'd arrived in the dining room were His Grace and Lord Rushton, but they'd made no move to join them.

Head tipped down, Sophie watched the duke as he studied his choices at the buffet with the stern severity of a military commander surveying his battle plan.

The image inexplicably made her lips twitch with mirth before she remembered herself and dropped her gaze back down to her plate.

Samantha straightened beside her. "No, I mean it. He had to have known who Sophie was specifically—or at the very least that she's a respectable, unmarried woman of quality. So he must have known that he could easily have been caught in that untoward moment. And then what?"

Sophie stared at her youngest sister as the meaning became clear.

"She makes a valid point," Serena said. "Everyone knows the Duke of Barton has eschewed marriage and successfully evaded the parson's noose for a decade now. Why would he take such a chance last night? Unless…"

Serena trailed off and Sophie found herself staring at her sister's profile as she waited with bated breath for her to finish speaking.

Unless...what? Sophie's heart was racing too quickly and she drew in a deep breath, pushing aside this surge of emotions she couldn't decipher. "It doesn't matter," she said, her tone shorter than intended.

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?" Sarah asked. "Of course it matters."

Samantha answered for her. "She means it's done now. Sophie called him out on his lies. He didn't deny it." She shrugged, reaching past Sophie for the butter. "His reasoning doesn't much matter now, does it?"

"I suppose not." Sarah had the practical air about her as she said it—the one that Sophie had always admired.

She tried to be as logical and reasonable as her mathematics-loving sister, but almost always failed when emotions got the best of her. Her first season was the perfect example. She'd learned her lesson well with that debacle.

And she'd heed that lesson now. Emotions had no place here, not when her sisters were counting on her to find a match. Not when her brother needed her to help secure their sisters' futures.

"Samantha is right," she said, more to herself than anyone. "It doesn't matter any longer. What's done is done, and the best thing I can do now is move forward with our plan."

Serena arched a brow as she sipped her tea. Lowering her cup, she asked, "So it's back to Lord Rushton then, is it?"

Sophie gave a short nod, but even as she did so, she had to fight the urge to glance up at the Duke of Barton. Her skin prickled and her breath caught in her lungs as heat stole into her cheeks.

Was he watching her or was it her imagination?

"Someone ought to tell His Grace that this matter is over so he'll stop glaring daggers at poor Sophie," Samantha said under her breath.

Sophie dipped her chin. So he was staring. And she could feel

his attention as surely as if he was touching her. How odd.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but…" Sarah hesitated, which had Sophie and her other sisters staring across the table at her. "Er, do you suppose the Earl of Rushton will still be amenable to the plan? He seems to be friends with the duke, and—"

"Of course he'll still be amenable," Serena said quickly. "It's not as though he and Sophie ever meant for this to be a love match. Surely he'll understand once Sophie has a chance to explain."

"If she even has to explain," Samantha said. "It's likely the duke hasn't told a soul about his bad behavior." She took a bite of her biscuit with a mischievous grin. "I know I wouldn't."

Sophie laughed despite the anxious knot curling in her belly. Her sisters had raised a number of points to consider, most of which she'd already been stewing over herself.

"What matters now is how we proceed," she said, aiming for the sort of practicality that Sarah exuded so well. "I cannot undo last night's debacles, but going forward I will do my very best to ignore the duke and put all my energy into ensuring this match with Lord Rushton is a success."

Her sisters nodded approvingly, and for a moment, Sophie allowed herself to feel hopeful. Last night was behind her, and today was a new day.

All she had to do was avoid one man and have a straightforward conversation with another. Not difficult at all, really.

"Good morning, my lovely nieces," her aunt sang as she hovered beside them.

"Good morning, Aunt Clara," Sophie said. Her smile felt nearly genuine as her sisters greeted their aunt in turn.

"I have wonderful news," their aunt said just as their brother strode into the room with one of his chums from his school days. Both her brother and his handsome friend with the dark unkempt hair looked as though they'd stayed awake far too late and had been up to no good.

Sarah's chin notched higher as watched them both. "I do wish our brother would find better company to keep."

None of the others argued. While Tobias was still young, the death of their father had meant that he'd grown up quickly this past year. Sophie hardly expected him to give up all of his friendships, but seeing their disheveled state...she couldn't help but agree that perhaps it was time for Tobias to find a new compatriot.

Tobias spotted them and broke away from his friend, joining them with his usual warm smile.

"Good morning," he said as he patted Samantha's head as though she were still a little girl. "What have I missed?"

"I was just about to tell your sisters about the activity I have planned for today," Aunt Clara said brightly. She clapped her hands together. "Sleigh rides."

Excited chatter filled the air as the guests around them heard their aunt and gathered closer.

"What a lovely idea," Samantha said with a grin.

"That sounds pleasant, indeed," Serena added. With a meaningful look in Sophie's direction, she added quietly, "And perhaps the perfect setting for a private conversation."

Sophie nodded, nerves and anticipation making it difficult to sit still. Serena was right. Her aunt would surely pair her with the Earl of Rushton, and this would mark the perfect time to speak candidly about their understanding.

Aunt Clara was one step ahead, as always. "I'll be making up a list of those who wish to participate and then assigning pairs to each sleigh," she announced to the group at large. "This will not only be a diverting outdoor activity to make the most of this beautiful snowy landscape, but a wonderful opportunity for us all to get to know each other better."

"Indeed," Serena said with a little huff of amusement. "I believe she means this will give the eligible gentlemen an opportunity to get to know *us*."

Sophie exchanged a laughing look with her sisters. Her aunt's methods weren't exactly subtle, but they were certainly efficient.

A little while later, the guests who wished to take part in the sleigh rides were gathered in the drawing room awaiting instructions.

Sophie stood amidst her sisters. Despite all their talk earlier, they were still hovering about her as though the duke might swoop in and steal her away.

Like a dragon with its prey.

The thought had her brows coming down as she listened to her sisters whispering and laughing amongst themselves. She might have her doubts about his intentions during that first encounter, but there was no denying what she'd overheard.

The man had made a joke about ruining her reputation. Surely

that was the final word on whether or not the Duke of Barton was a decent fellow.

"Oh my," Sarah said beside her. "That *is* surprising."

"I expected Lord Rushton to take part in the fun," Samantha said. "But I wouldn't have taken the duke for the sleigh riding sort."

Sophie's head swiveled so quickly she nearly hurt her neck. Sure enough, there he was. In the doorway next to Lord Rushton and looking just as stern and striking and irritatingly handsome as he had the night before.

Drat.

She turned to face her aunt as everyone else turned their attention to their hostess as well.

"Never mind him," Serena whispered beside her. "He's probably just here to mock the rest of us for daring to have fun."

"Or he's just here to keep his friend company until the sleigh rides begin," Sarah pointed out.

Sophie nodded. They were right. And why he was here hardly mattered. What mattered was the sleigh ride to come and the conversation it would bring with the Earl of Rushton.

She clasped her hands together tightly as she waited for her aunt to call her name.

"The next sleigh will carry His Grace, The Duke of Barton, and my dear niece, Lady Sophie."

Sophie's jaw dropped as the whispers began. Her sisters crowded in closer, and Sarah was murmuring something but Sophie was too stunned to hear it.

She must have been mistaken. Her aunt knew she needed to be matched up with the Earl of Rushton at every opportunity to solidify their understanding.

"Then the Earl of Rushton and Lady Serena," her aunt continued.

Serena sighed with exasperation. "What am I supposed to do with Lord Rushton? It's not me he's to marry."

Samantha shushed her, and they all turned to see Tobias moving closer. As one, they fell silent. It would not do to have Tobias interfering with their schemes. He'd only be brought in on their plans when she and Lord Rushton had finalized their arrangement.

Sophie's pulse quickened with alarm as she watched Lord Rushton lean in to speak to the Duke of Barton.

How were they to come to any sort of understanding if she

didn't have a moment to speak to the Earl in some semblance of privacy?

Her heart thudded painfully when the duke's gaze lifted and collided with hers.

And how was she to survive a sleigh ride alone with him?

"Everyone will be watching," Sarah said in a placating tone from beside her. "It's not as though you'll be completely alone with the man. With so many onlookers and the other sleighs riding so closely….why, you'll hardly have any privacy at all."

Sophie shot her sister a wide-eyed look. She knew Sarah only meant to make her feel better, but she didn't wish to be comforted. She needed a way out of this.

The moment her aunt ceased speaking, she seized her chance. "Aunt Clara," she said as she reached her aunt's side, her sisters close on her heels. "I thought I was to be paired with the Earl of Rushton. Perhaps you misspoke—"

"Of course I didn't misspeak." Her aunt's eyes were lit with laughter. "I partnered you with the duke because I saw the way you two danced last night." Her gaze grew distant and dreamy. "And this morning...why, he couldn't tear his eyes away from you."

Sophie's lips parted. "No, Aunt Clara, you've misunderstood. It's not like that—"

"And why not?" Her aunt's brows arched. "You're too critical of yourself, dear. I know you worry about your reputation, but a man like the duke would surely not be frightened off by some silly rumors."

"It's not just that. Aunt Clara, you know I need to marry soon. The sooner the better." She cast a quick look around to make sure no one was listening. "My best chance is Lord Rushton."

"He's a fine catch, to be certain, but the duke is looking to wed as well. And, my dear…" she leaned in close as if letting her in on a secret. "He's a duke."

Sophie blinked. "But...but…"

She had protests. She had good reasons why they should not be paired together. But when she tried to think of them to rattle off to her aunt, all she could think was…

He was looking to marry?

Truly?

"The duke means to wed?" It was Sarah who said it, and her aunt nodded in response.

“Oh yes. I have it on good authority.” She winked at Sophie. “You can thank me later…when you are a duchess.”

And then she was off, answering the other guests’ questions and taking command of the room once more.

“Well, that changes things,” Samantha said, her tone hesitant. “Doesn’t it?”

All three of Sophie’s sisters looked to her and she swallowed down that surge of shock and…whatever else it was she was feeling that she couldn’t quite name but which had her heart fluttering like mad.

“No,” she said firmly. “It changes nothing.” She glanced over at her sisters, ignoring the heated stare she could feel from the far side of the room where he stood and waited.

Where he waited *for her.*

She drew in a deep breath. “Even if he’s looking to marry, he’s certainly not interested in marrying me.”

His words from the night before came rushing back to her. His talk of marriage, of their understanding…

Her heart took a flying leap against her ribcage.

But then those snippets of conversation were replaced by the memory of that dreadful, tense second dance. She heard her own words coming back to her now and she swallowed.

He had misled her…hadn’t he?

And his intentions had been cruel…weren’t they?

“Sophie?” Serena prompted.

She glanced over at the glowering duke whose expression was anything but tender as he met her stare.

She let out a long exhale. “Even if he’d had an interest before, he definitely doesn’t now.” Sophie looked to her sisters who were nodding in grudging agreement.

“And besides,” Serena said. “Even if he did have an interest now, it’s clear that you wouldn’t wish to make a match with a man like him. Not after the way he treated you.”

Sarah and Samantha looked at her in question as if to see if Serena was right.

“Of course not,” Sophie said with a little more heat than absolutely necessary. “I would never even consider marrying a man like the Duke of Barton.”

Chapter Eight

The tense silence that filled the space between Raith and Lady Sophie sizzled in stark contrast to the serene landscape around them.

Laughter filtered back from other sleighs as snow softly drifted from the trees that lined the single-track path through the forest. All the while, the bells on the horse that pulled their little sleigh jingled merrily.

Raith's mouth tightened as he gave a quick glance at Sophie. Lines of tension creased her features as well and her hands fluttered nervously in her lap. They'd lift and then settle, lift and settle. It was almost maddening.

He cleared his throat. She started.

He sighed.

She made a noise that sounded distinctly like an *eep*.

This ride bordered on ridiculous.

"Lady Sophie," he started and then stopped. How did he begin?

"Your Grace," she returned, not giving him any purchase into the conversation.

"About last night," he said, his jaw locking in discomfort. Why was a simple *I'm sorry* so very difficult?

She drew in a long slow breath of the crisp air about them and then blew it out with a puff of steam. Her shoulders hunched slightly as the air left her. Whatever she meant to share, it weighed on her. Without meaning to, he pulled up a bit on the reins, his horse slowing.

She angled toward him, her hands clasping in her lap. "Last night was a disaster."

Well, they agreed upon that.

The question was why. Why had the evening gone so terribly wrong? Was it his former reputation? The fact that she'd mistaken his identity? Some combination of both. That was what he was here to find out, only he'd forgotten one important fact.

He was a poor communicator.

"I agree," he said at last. "If you're at all amenable, I'd like to

discuss why and how the evening ended so poorly."

She winced, straightening in her seat. "When you were walking with Lord Rushton, my aunt pointed him out. Only I thought he was you."

Ahh. That made sense. How had he not realized sooner the man she'd mistaken him for was his best friend? That realization smarted a great deal. Because that meant Lady Sophie had kissed him thinking that he was Rush. Did she wish to marry his friend? His stomach roiled at the idea of spending next Christmastide with Rush and his new bride, Sophie.

But why should that upset him so? The brief understanding they'd shared had been in regards to a marriage of mutual convenience, nothing more. "I'm sorry my identity was such a disappointment to you."

"Oh, no. Well...that is to say…" She turned toward him again. "It's just that Lord Rushton made it clear that he wished to marry, and everyone knows that you…" She let the sentence drift off like the bits of snow dancing in the air.

So it had been about his reputation.

And who could blame her really?

He snapped the reins, causing the horse to kick up its feet, as bits of snow sprayed them. Cold wet clumps smacked him in the face and splattered his jacket.

Lady Sophie picked up the muff she'd discarded on the seat and began to brush off the wet clumps from her pelisse and face. Her hip pressed to his as she used the shaggy roll of fabric to work the snow from her side. His own body tensed in response to the touch, and he was reminded of all the reasons he'd been so enamored with her the night before.

If only they'd not had that second dance. Had she grown so angry when she'd learned he was the rakish Duke of Barton? It made sense, and yet...

But his thoughts and his questions were interrupted when her muff brushed his sleeve with a determined swipe down his arm.

He looked over at her, his gaze locking with the warm brown of her eyes.

"You'll catch your death if that snow melts through your coat," she said.

His mouth opened and then closed as she brushed snow from his chest and then pressed against his side to reach his other arm.

And then, her smooth leather glove came to his face. With gentle fingers she wiped a splatter of snow from the tip of his nose.

Without pause, she reached for another on his cheek.

For a moment he held his breath. She was so close. He'd forgotten all about his apology, in fact words failed him entirely. All he could think was that if he turned his head a bit to the right, he might be able to kiss her again. She'd been so sweet last night in his arms, under his lips. Would she be again today?

His eyes drifted closed as for a moment he imagined a snowflake kiss.

This ride could have been laden with romance and…

Then his gaze flew open. What was wrong with him?

He didn't want romance, feelings, or snow kisses. He wanted to fulfill his mother's wish and make an heir.

And Sophie, she didn't need an education on why he was unlikable. She'd managed to suss that out in less than an hour. Strange, his own appreciation for her grew even as her opinion of him diminished.

Her hand left his face, and his eyes snapped back open. He had the ridiculous urge to follow her hand with his face and press his own cheek into her palm.

He bent to the right. He didn't intend to actually do it, but leaning closer, he could feel her warmth.

And he could see the trail to the right.

Which is how he happened to note the streak of grey orange that flashed from the woods and straight in front of their horse.

Quick as a whip, he yanked the reins, sending the sleigh to the right and up and out of the established track, narrowly missing the fox that crossed into the woods on the other side of the trail.

He was expecting the jolt as the sleigh jostled into the air, but Sophie must not have realized and in sickening slow motion, he saw her bounce up into the air coming high off the seat. Would she be thrown? His own throat tightened, his muscles clenching at the thought of her hurt.

He dropped one of the reins and shot out his hand, hooking her waist and pulling her into his side.

Her body crashed into his, her arms darting out and locking around his waist even as her face pressed into his shoulder.

"Oof," she said on a whoosh of air as her chest collided with his side.

“Sophie,” he asked, his concern ringing in his own ears as he drew the horse to a stop.

Behind him, he heard the other drivers pull up their horses too, but he didn’t look back. His gaze was focused down on Sophie’s fur trimmed bonnet and the elaborate twist of hair at her nape. “Are you all right?”

She didn’t remove her arms from around his middle, nor did she lift away from his side. Sophie remained tucked against him even as she tilted her head up, her gaze locking with his. “I’m fine,” she whispered. “Thanks to you.”

Her lips were softly parted. She released a breath, and it fanned his cheeks, warming them even as his own face drifted closer to hers.

He’d been so afraid, and now she was close enough that if he just tucked his chin a bit lower—

“Raith,” Rush called, his feet crunching through the snow. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” he called back, lifting his head even as regret made him frown. They were on full display, how could he have forgotten that? What would have happened if they’d been caught kissing?

He gave his head a bit of a shake. He was losing his mental faculties.

Gently, he untangled himself from Sophie and stepped out of the sleigh as well. Removing his coat, he placed it over her lap. A flush bloomed across her cheeks as she accepted the gesture and tucked the coat about her legs. Raith grimaced. If only he were a better version of himself. Because when he watched Sophie tuck his coat about herself, he got that feeling deep in his gut that she should be his, wrapped in his coat and tucked against his side, safe and warm against him.

But he shook those thoughts off, as they set about righting the little sleigh onto the track. It took two other men, but they managed to get it back onto the track and moving once again.

And once again, silence had descended between him and Sophie.

To be fair, the tone was different. Less frosty and more comfortable, though no less thick.

“Your Grace,” Lady Sophie scooted a bit closer. “There is something I’ve been meaning to say to you.”

He did not take his eyes from the track. How did one explain that a seasoned rake had driven off the path by the gentle brush of

a woman's gloved hand on his face? Once was bad enough but twice?

The entire party would be calling him smitten.

Which was impossible.

He didn't succumb to such feelings. "What is that?"

"I…" She touched his shoulder. "I'm afraid that I owe you an apology."

It took every ounce of his concentration not to jump the track again. Her words caught him completely off guard. He was the one who should be saying he was sorry. "You are apologizing to me?"

She nodded. "Whatever else happened, it was me who made the initial mistake. I can see that now, and I started our disastrous evening in motion."

He sucked in several deep gulps of air in an attempt to slow his pulse. "There is no need to apologize. Your mistake was an honest one. Mine was…" He grimaced, searching for the right words. "What lady wouldn't be appalled when she'd discovered she'd been cavorting with a known rake?"

There was a pause that stretched between them as Sophie shivered. Her voice dropped to a husky whisper as she leaned in closer as if seeking his warmth.

His skin prickled as her breath whispered across his ear and neck. "Especially when that rake is a self-proclaimed dragon."

The sleigh skittered to the side and he only just managed to keep it on the track. Sophie had upended his cool exterior from the moment he'd seen her at breakfast, but that last comment. It was simply too much.

Was it possible that she'd overheard his comment to Sexton and Andrews? How could that be? But then again, how else could she have chosen that exact reference? It couldn't be a coincidence.

No wonder she'd been so angry during their second dance.

He'd meant the words in jest, a sarcastic quip to a ridiculous statement, but she wouldn't know that. Sophie must hate him vehemently.

He scowled at the track before him as his own words came back to him. If only he'd kept his temper in check for once. If only their timing hadn't been so awful. If only…

She shivered again and he turned his head slightly to see her gazing up at him, eyes wide with apprehension.

As if his reputation wasn't bad enough, he'd gone and ruined

any chance he might have had of making her believe he was anything other than what he was. His father's son.

He frowned down at her. Oh yes, she must certainly despise him.

And who could blame her?

Chapter Nine

Sophie couldn't say if it was the chill in the air or in his glare that made her tremble.

She went to move away from him, suddenly and painfully aware that in her desire for warmth, she'd pressed herself against his side like a...like a...well, she didn't want to think what she must have looked like to him.

The moment she started to scoot away, however, he took one hand off the reins and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her back into his heat. "You're freezing," he growled.

She felt the rumble of his voice through his chest and her heart fluttered wildly in response. She shouldn't have mentioned the dragon comment. Truthfully, she hadn't meant to bring it up—it was too humiliating. The way he'd talked about her and that she'd obviously been eavesdropping.

But curiosity had been stronger than embarrassment, and it had just...slipped out.

She'd wanted to see his reaction, and she had.

He was furious. Clearly. But that made his actions now all the more confusing. He was holding her. Warming her.

Heavens, he was...*snuggling* her.

She cast a quick glance around them, her heart hammering in her throat for reasons she could not explain. She was cold, he was warm. This was a simple exchange of heat, that was all.

Her look confirmed what she'd suspected. After the near-collision with the fox had set them off track, the other sleighs had gone on ahead so there was no sleigh behind them. Which meant, no one was watching them.

She shivered again, which had his scowl deepening. "We should get you back home to warm yourself by the fire."

She nodded mutely. She couldn't very well tell this man that this last shiver had definitely not been from the cold.

Oh no.

The moment he'd wrapped his arm around her and pulled her against his side, the chill had fled and was replaced by a flood of

heat so strong she was certain she could feel flames nipping at her cheeks.

"Lady Sophie…" He said her name so slowly and in such a serious tone, she found herself bracing for a tirade or a criticism. Perhaps a lecture on the evils of eavesdropping.

He cleared his throat. "What you overheard…"

She bit her lip. She might scream if he didn't finish a sentence sometime soon. His pause lasted a beat too long, and she couldn't stop the words from flying out of her mouth. "Eavesdropping like that was inexcusable, I know. But in my defense, I truly did not intend to snoop, I was merely walking by with my sister and—"

"Lady Sophie." He slowed the sleigh to a stop and turned to face her with that terrifyingly stern expression. "I am not angry with you for overhearing my words, I merely regret that you heard something so crass."

"Oh." She had no idea what else to say to that, and so she sat there staring up at him with wide eyes and her mouth still pursed in an *O*.

He shifted so he was facing her more fully. "I made those inexcusable statements about you and my intentions out of anger."

"Anger," she repeated slowly.

His expression barely shifted from that fierce scowl, but she was almost certain she caught a flicker of unease as he searched for the right words. "Not with you, Lady Sophie." His voice was surprisingly gentle. "I was angry with the company I was keeping."

Her brows came down as she thought back to the men he'd been speaking with. Aside from Lord Rushton, it had been Lord Sexton and Lord Andrews. Men who had worse reputations than the duke, her brother, and all of his friends combined. She'd been irritated they'd been invited, but her aunt was close with their families, and so it had to be done.

"I see," she said quietly.

His gaze searched hers. "Do you?"

She nodded. "I think I do understand."

He flinched slightly and the hand still gripping the reins clenched tight. "I'm afraid I'm not always in command of my temper. And when riled, I tend to say things I do not mean."

She watched him closely, her chest warming tenfold as she did. For beneath that stern, striking visage, she caught a hint of vulnerability that made her heart ache and squeeze.

“I am sorry, Lady Sophie. Truly.”

Sophie couldn’t immediately respond. Her lips had parted, but her breath had caught in her throat. She had the awe-filled sensation she’d only experienced before when she’d witnessed a butterfly coming out of its cocoon. A rare sight to see in nature, and she suspected no less rare than watching this man—this duke—apologize so very sweetly.

“It’s all right,” she finally said, her voice thin and breathless. “I understand. It’s clear I took your comments out of context, so I ought to apologize to you as well. I shouldn’t have leapt to the worst possible conclusion.”

For a long moment he held her stare. His gaze was guarded. Almost wary, as if he were waiting for something else.

Something bad.

“That’s all?” he finally said, a brow arching in disbelief. “You believe me, and you…forgive me?”

She nodded, nibbling on her lower lip, more nervous now than she’d ever been in her life. Because without that anger between them, without the misunderstandings and the tense silence, she felt utterly exposed.

Like he could see all of her. Every fault and every flaw. Every insecurity had been aired before this man over the course of the last twelve hours.

He knew of her desperation to marry. He’d seen her emotional outburst. He’d felt her shiver at his touch.

She might as well have been the prey to his dragon because as he regarded her in silence, she’d never been more vulnerable.

“So,” he said finally, his tone brisk and low. “Where does that leave us?”

She blinked. Where indeed? Her heart was pounding so hard she was certain he could feel it against his chest. His arm was still snug about her waist, and this close she could see the specks of gold that warmed his dark eyes.

“As friends?” she offered.

He stared at her as though she’d spoken in some foreign tongue. “Friends,” he repeated.

Again, the way he said it made her think he was entirely unfamiliar with the term. “Yes, you know…friends.” She shrugged, her hands flitting helplessly in the air between them. “We’ve moved beyond acquaintances, I should think. And now that the

misunderstandings between us have been resolved, I see no reason why we should not be…" She trailed off as her gaze met his. "Friends," she ended lamely.

She tried to swallow but her mouth had gone dry. He'd leaned in and was studying her so closely it was as though he were attempting to peer inside her mind.

All at once he sat back, as far as he was able with an arm still wrapped around her, and the new distance between them had her inhaling deeply, only now aware that she'd been holding her breath.

"Very well, then," he said, though a crease had formed at the bridge of his nose as though he were still a little perplexed by this notion of their being friends.

She could well understand why. She didn't imagine this powerful, eligible, desirable duke had many young ladies asking to be his friend.

She imagined most women wanted far more from him.

Her traitorous mind chose that moment to call up the memory of his kiss. Her lips parted with the intensity of sensations that flooded her at the mere memory of his arms about her, of his firm lips covering her own…

"We should be getting back," he said. He slipped his arm from her waist to use both hands on the reins, setting them into motion once more. "We wouldn't want the others to wonder at our absence."

"No," she agreed. "We wouldn't want that."

They rode in silence, the sleigh moving at a fast clip as he tried to catch up to the others. He was right, of course. They wouldn't want anyone getting the wrong idea if they were to disappear for any length of time.

When the others were in sight, some of the tension eased from her shoulders, and she rested back in the seat. Friends. She was now friends...with a duke.

She bit her lip as she snuck a sidelong glance in his direction. So very tall, with such broad shoulders. And from this angle, his striking features looked almost regal.

He looked every inch the powerful duke. She'd known from the start that he was ridiculously handsome, but this sleigh ride had shown her a new facet of the Duke of Barton and she wasn't sure she liked it.

Or rather, she was afraid she liked it too much. That hint of vulnerability. The way he'd been so straightforward with his explanation and his apology. The way he'd protected her on instinct and had looked after her warmth and welfare. It spoke of a kindness hidden underneath all those fierce scowls and heated glares.

She nibbled on her lower lip. She hadn't been expecting that. And she was definitely in danger of liking it too much. More than a friend ought.

She looked back at the track ahead, studiously ignoring the twinge of regret. Maybe they might have formed a connection if she hadn't mistaken him for another. They might have avoided all the unpleasantness if she hadn't leapt to conclusions.

She shook off the thought. It was no use wondering what might have been now. What was done was done. And now…?

Well, now they were friends. What a hollow word, shallow compared with the intricacies of their acquaintance so far.

They'd very nearly reached the house and the others when his voice interrupted her thoughts. "I might need your assistance, Lady Sophie."

She glanced over with arched brows. "My assistance?"

"Indeed." A muscle in his jaw worked, and she thought perhaps he was trying to hide his amusement.

This hunch was proven correct when he shot her a sidelong glance and his dark eyes danced with wicked laughter. "You see, I've never been friends with a young lady before. I'm not entirely sure how to proceed."

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing aloud. Her chest felt lighter than air at this glimpse of mischievous amusement from the staid and stoic duke. "Well, first I'd suggest we form an agreement," she said slowly.

He arched a brow in question.

"It seems we have a tendency to misunderstand one another," she continued, laughter sneaking into her voice.

"That's an understatement," he murmured.

"So perhaps, from here on out, we ought to agree to speak frankly with one another," she finished.

The sleigh slid to a stop and he turned to face her. "I think I can manage that."

She didn't miss the glint of amusement in his eyes nor the way it

made his lips quirk up one side.

She felt her breath hitch in response. “Then it is a deal,” she said, sticking her hand out between them with a wide grin.

He clasped her gloved hand in his, but rather than shake it like he would a male friend, he lifted it to his lips.

She inhaled quickly and the cold air made her head spin.

“It’s a deal,” he murmured when he lifted his head.

Chapter Ten

The guests who'd attended the sleigh rides returned to the salon in which they'd first gathered. Refreshments were now being served to warm the merrymakers after their adventure through the snow.

And though the books in his room still called, with Sophie's hand tucked into his arm, Raith found himself steering them both into the salon to see her settled. He'd also rather enjoyed watching as she'd removed her bonnet, pelisse and gloves.

Now he had her seated at a small tea table.

Tea and cakes were being served, along with a delightful hot chocolate drink. A mix of warmed cacao and spicy chile, it delighted the tongue.

He fetched a glass for himself and his new *friend*, watching the liquid warm her cheeks as she smiled gratefully at him over the rim of her mug.

Surrounded by a crowd, he hardly heard anyone else as they slowly sipped their drinks. Lady Sophie truly was fetching with this new glow of warmth and that smile that seemed to grace her lips so effortlessly now that she was no longer intent on glaring at him.

But his attention was diverted when Rush came into the room, Lady Serena on his arm. The two instantly parted ways, Rush frowning after the wild beauty as she retreated to a corner where the other Maxwell sisters were gathered. Had something happened that he looked so unsettled?

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" Raith asked as he glanced across the table at Sophie. She nodded her assent, and he quickly crossed the room to his friend.

"Rush."

Rush looked up, his frown of concern instantly vanishing. "Well, that was an interesting outing. Was it not?"

Raith's gaze narrowed as he attempted to understand Rush's sudden change of mood. "Indeed. Thank you for your aid with my sleigh."

"No problem at all." Rush waved his hand in dismissal. "How did your attempt at an apology go?"

“Quite well,” he answered. “I think we understand each other much better now.”

“So,” Rush shifted, a shadow crossing his face again as his mouth tightened. “Have you agreed to court?”

Raith paused, studying his friend. Something was off here. “How was your ride in the sleigh?”

Rush’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “Well. It was…interesting.”

“Would you care to elaborate?”

Rush shook his head. “Not yet.”

So something had happened in the sleigh ride. “Are you certain? I might be able to help.”

“Forgive me, but I might need a bit to order my thoughts.”

“Of course.” Sorting through feelings was one of Raith’s least favorite tasks, and so he completely understood Rush’s need for time. Raith had a strong urge to walk away, but his friend deserved better. And so, he added in a stilted tone, “But you know you can talk to me. Whenever.”

Rush gave him a genuine smile at that. “I do know, but I appreciate the words, nonetheless.”

“It’s the least I can do. You’ve helped me a great deal.” What would Raith do without a friend like Rush? He didn’t know a finer, more generous man. Raith raked a hand through his hair. His father had never had a kind word to say to him. Never told Raith he was proud of his son or complimented him in any way.

His mother was right. He had those same tendencies, and yet, here he was, all in one day, apologizing, befriending a woman, and thanking another longtime friend. What was happening to him?

“I’m happy to do it.” Rush patted him on the shoulder. “Which is why I'd like to know. How did the ride go for you?”

Raith lifted his hands. “It went well.”

“Well?”

“We both apologized and…” He looked down, running a hand over the back of his neck. “And we’ve agreed to be friends.”

“Friends?”

“Friends.” The word had seemed oddly endearing when Sophie had said it, but coming from his own lips, it merely sounded odd.

“You. Friends. With the woman that you thought to marry?” Rush’s voice dropped low. Raith didn’t need to look at his face to know it was marked with incredulity.

“Is it so hard to picture me as her friend?”

“Honestly? Yes.” Rush laughed then, a low chuckle that made Raith’s lips turn up too. “You are many things, my friend.” He held up his hand, and Raith found himself lifting his head as Rush began to tick off a list on his fingers. “Smart, intimidating, powerful, and dangerously attractive to women. But a warm and fuzzy friend is not in your wheelhouse. It isn’t even on your ship.”

Raith couldn’t deny that. “I’m trying to…” What? Change? No, that wasn’t right. He was trying to find a wife, that was all. He wasn’t here to make friends. “It isn’t, is it?”

“No,” Rush said, looking across the room. Raith followed his gaze. The Maxwell sisters had clumped together once again, their heads bent together as they whispered furiously at the table where he’d left Sophie. “But I do happen to know that you came here looking for a bride. And now that you and Lady Sophie have mended your misunderstanding…”

Raith sucked in his breath as his friend’s words trailed off meaningfully. Rush was correct.

If he and Sophie now understood who one another were, and they were both still interested in marrying quickly, then what was holding them back from being far more than friends?

The sisters all seemed to look up at the same moment and he realized he’d been staring at them. He winced even as they scattered, leaving Sophie alone at the table once again.

“Stop yammering with me and go talk to her,” Rush said behind him.

“I don’t yammer.”

Rush chuckled again and then gave him a nudge in Sophie’s direction.

He slowly crossed the room, the blush blooming in Sophie’s cheeks telling him that something had changed for her too. Had her sisters said something about him?

He looked at the ceiling. Now he was wondering about the clucking of women. But he kept making his way across the room, finally reaching Sophie’s side. She stood, her body so close he caught a whiff of her apple blossom scent.

Her lips pressed together as she seemed to look everywhere but at him. “How is Lord Rushton?”

“He’s…” He’d been about to say fine, but they’d agreed to be more straightforward. “I’m not entirely certain.”

Sophie’s gaze grew thoughtful. “Serena is acting oddly as well.”

His brows lifted. “Interesting.”

“Do you think something transpired between them on the sleigh ride?” Her eyes grew wider as she tilted her chin higher, finally meeting his gaze head on.

“I don’t know. Did she say anything about Rush?”

Sophie shook her head. “Not a word.”

He stared back at his friend. Had something happened between Rush and Serena?

“What did you talk about then?” Sophie asked.

Carefully blocking her from the rest of the assembled guests, he reached for her hand atop the table and brushed her fingers between his own. “Rush and I discussed my new friendship with you.”

“Oh,” she breathed, her hand closing to clasp his. “I see.”

He had so much more to say, which in and of itself was rather comical, but with the audience they currently had, this was neither the time nor the place.

“I’m very pleased we’ve straightened out all our misunderstandings.”

“As am I,” she said, her voice sounding high and a touch breathy.

That made him relax. He knew that sound. She was very interested in what he had to say. “And I know that we just made a deal but…”

“Yes?”

“I think we should make some amendments.” His thumb brushed the delicate skin of her wrist in the small space between where her glove ended and her dress sleeve began.

“What sort of amendments?” Her other hand came to the base of her throat. Her lips parted as she looked up at him. When she’d removed her bonnet earlier, a stray curl had come loose from her coif and he resisted the urge to tuck it behind her ear. He wished to feel the velvet of her cheek and run his hand to the soft shell of her ear.

His heart gave a painful thud at the question in her eyes. He wasn’t nervous. Of course he wasn’t. He was a duke, and he meant to find a wife. This was a logical step toward ensuring an heir. “It’s a conversation that requires a bit more privacy.”

Her gaze dropped to their joined hands before lifting to meet his again. “Your Grace,” she said, her voice catching. “Haven’t we

made that mistake already?"

He gave her a genuine smile. Because she was right and smart to guard herself against another debacle. It was part of why he liked her so much. "Too true." He straightened, releasing her hand. He wasn't looking to do anything untoward. This time there would be no misunderstandings between them and nothing improper to confuse the situation. "I promise this can be a perfectly chaperoned conversation. Just not here. We're far too…" He glanced around, noting several pairs of eyes looking in their direction.

"I understand," she murmured. She bit her lip as she considered what he'd said and when her gaze met his again, she wore a look of determination that made his heart clench in the oddest way. "Meet me in the music room at four. My sisters and I will always gather to practice at that time. We'll be chaperoned, but they'll also give us the space we need to speak privately."

"Perfect." Then he looked down at her empty cup. "Shall I fetch you another drink?"

She gave him a glowing smile as she handed the fine china back to him. "Are you always so attentive to your friends?"

He quirked a brow as he took the cup from her hand. "Most definitely not."

Chapter Eleven

Sophie winced as Sarah fumbled over the pianoforte keys for the tenth time, but she continued walking the length of the room as Sarah muttered something about trying again.

"Oh no, please don't start from the beginning," Samantha pleaded from where she sat on the settee.

Sophie shared Samantha's sentiment. Sarah had many fine and valuable talents...but music was not one of them. Poor Sarah was frowning down at the keys in clear frustration as she picked up where she'd left off.

Samantha turned her exasperated expression to Sophie. "And do stop pacing, Sophie. You're making me dizzy just watching you."

"I'm sorry," Sophie murmured. But the moment she sat down, she was back up again, her body unable to settle. How could she sit still and act calm when the Duke of Barton would be here at any moment?

Would he propose? Was that what he'd been suggesting?

She was almost certain it was. But after so many misassumptions, she was starting to doubt her intuition. What if she'd supposed wrong...again?

She clasped her hands together to keep from wringing them like some fretful old maid. Her gaze flickered to the grandfather clock in the corner for what had to be the hundredth time this hour.

Two minutes until four.

Something told her he wasn't the type to be late. In fact, if she were the betting sort, she'd wager her allowance that he would be here the moment the hour struck.

She drew in a shaky breath as her belly coiled into a knot of nerves.

"Where is Serena?" she asked, trying to distract herself. "I thought she'd have joined us for now."

Samantha shrugged, and Sarah kept her focus on the keys as she answered. "She said she was going to rest after the sleigh ride. I haven't seen her since."

"Neither have I," Samantha said.

Sophie turned to pace in the opposite direction. She hadn't seen her either. Should she be worried? She hadn't seemed overset after the sleigh ride, just...off. She'd joined her sisters in pestering Sophie with questions about what had transpired on her sleigh ride with the duke, but after hearing Sophie's response that they'd merely sorted out their misunderstanding and had agreed to be friends, Serena had made her excuses and run off.

She glanced at the clock. One minute until four.

"Serena's probably slipped out to explore the grounds," Samantha said. "You know she cannot abide being inside for long."

Sophie nodded. "You're likely right."

In part, discussing Serena had been a distraction. And without it, Sophie was clasping her hands together so tightly they were starting to ache. She released them to shake them out and realized her palms were clammy. In fact, she was warm all over.

A fire blazed in the fireplace, which was surely why she felt so overheated, though it did little to explain why her stays felt too tight and her skin prickled with impatience with every passing moment.

By the time the music room's door opened, Sophie was so tense with nerves she let out a little squeak of alarm that had Samantha staring at her and even Sarah stopped her interminable playing, to glance up from the pianoforte.

"Lady Sophie," the duke said in that low, serious voice of his. He turned his attention briefly to the others. "Lady Samantha, Lady Sarah."

Her sisters curtsied politely and said all the right things. All while Sophie stood there and stared.

She couldn't stop staring. Her eyes felt too wide, and her breathing had grown absurdly shallow, and her head too light, and...oh dear.

She said a silent prayer that she would not faint before this day was through.

"Lady Sophie," he said again as he drew close. His voice was so low that only she could hear. It made the room feel ten times smaller than it was, and she just narrowly stopped herself from backing away as he approached.

Her heart was fluttering wildly, but she was *not* prey.

Even if he did look every inch the dragon at this particular moment.

He stopped an appropriate distance away, not so close that he was in her space, but close enough for a private conversation.

Her sisters were studiously not looking at them, and Sarah resumed her jarring attempts at playing. While not exactly pleasing to the ear, it filled the silence, and that helped to calm Sophie's nerves. She even managed a bright smile as she asked, "Have you recovered from our morning adventure on the sleigh?"

His lips quirked up, and the gleam in his eyes was knowing. He had not come here to discuss their sleigh ride, and she well knew it. But he went along with her diversion. "Indeed. I am thoroughly warmed through after that snowy outing. And you?"

She nodded. "Very warm now, thank you."

Too warm, in fact. But he didn't need to know that.

He gestured toward two chairs by the fireplace. "Shall we?"

She nodded, willing herself to breathe evenly as she took a seat by the fire. She didn't dare peek over at her sisters, but she could practically feel them trying to listen without being obvious.

The duke wasted no time, for which she was grateful. Her heart couldn't take much more anticipation.

"Lady Sophie, I'd like to discuss the topic of marriage."

She took a deep breath. "All right."

He cleared his throat, his posture ramrod straight and his countenance so somber he looked as though he might start speaking about the perils of war rather than matrimony. "As you must be aware, I am in need of a wife."

She gave a short nod. *Now* she was aware that he was seeking a wife. Information that would have been useful the night before.

"And as we've agreed to be straightforward with one another," he continued gravely. "I understand that you also desire to be wed."

Desire to be wed. His words echoed in her mind. Something about the phrasing made her belly dip in aversion. It was the truth. Of course it was. But she *needed* to be married. She didn't desire it. And 'to be wed' made it sound so...passive. And impersonal. Like it wasn't about two people choosing to become partners but rather a state one found oneself in quite accidentally.

She stared down at her hands, which were tightly clasped in her lap. What was she doing, parsing his turn of a phrase?

It didn't matter how he asked her to marry him, just that he did.

"Lady Sophie, it occurs to me that while our misunderstandings last night were regrettable, the actions were not unsound."

She lifted her head to stare at him, her brows knitting together in confusion. “Not unsound?”

He cleared his throat. “What I mean to say is…”

She found herself holding her breath as she watched him deliberate his next choice of words.

“I am still in need of a wife,” he said abruptly. “And you require a husband. I see no reason why we should not continue the understanding we’d agreed upon last night.”

Her lips parted. “Was that…” She swallowed, her heart pounding so loudly it drowned out her voice. “Was that a proposal, Your Grace?”

His flinch was slight but noticeable. “It was. Yes.” His chest rose with a deep inhale. “Lady Sophie, would you be amenable to marriage?”

She couldn’t immediately answer. Her heart seemed to have lodged itself in her throat.

“If your brother approves, of course,” he added hastily.

If her brother approved. Of a duke. A young, handsome, powerful, wealthy duke.

“I assure you, he would approve,” she said, her tone dry despite her fluttering pulse.

His lips quirked up on one corner in response. “Is that a yes, then?”

Yes. Of course it was a yes. He was a duke. She needed to be married. What kind of fool would say no? She opened her mouth to say yes, and yet, what came out of her mouth was, “Why?”

He stared. His mouth opened and then promptly shut. “Pardon?”

She wet her lips, keenly aware that Sarah’s awful playing had come to a stop, and she was fairly certain everyone in this room, including the duke, was holding their breath as they waited for her to explain.

What was she doing? Her heart hammered the same question. And a little voice of reason was screaming at her. *Just say yes already. Just…say yes. That’s all you have to do to help your brother and give your sisters every advantage. Just say yes.*

“Why?” she said again. This time she hurried to continue. “I just meant, why *now*, Your Grace?” The heat from the fire seemed to sear her cheeks as he regarded her like he’d just discovered some unknown species.

“Please do not misunderstand,” she said, her words tripping over

one another in her haste to explain herself. “I am thoroughly humbled by the request.” She couldn’t quite bring herself to say proposal. Nothing about his speech had sounded like a proposal. He’d offered an arrangement, plain and simple.

Which was wonderful because that was all she was seeking as well. A mutually beneficial arrangement. Which was why she should just say yes.

There was no reason to poke and prod. What was that proverbial saying? Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

And yet here she was, eyeing the horse’s mouth for all she was worth.

That logical part of her brain—the voice of practicality and reason that she’d been trying so hard to cultivate these past two years since her disastrous season—it was suddenly nowhere to be found.

She met his wide-eyed stare with as much courage as she could muster. “I’m merely curious, that’s all.”

He blinked slowly and she could practically see his mind turning over her words. “Curious about why I’m only now getting around to marriage or why I’m asking you?”

She let out a sharp exhale of relief. He didn’t sound offended. Merely interested in her way of thinking. “Both, I suppose.” She shrugged. “I had my debut season a few years ago. You were not in town at the time but—”

“I heard about your debut, Lady Sophie.”

Her gaze snapped up to meet his, but there was no unkindness there. Whatever it was he’d heard, he was not trying to shame her for it. And he didn’t ask for any explanations about the rumors that had swirled that season and so she didn’t offer any.

“Yes, well,” she continued in a shaky voice. “I recall hearing quite often about how the Duke of Barton had no interest in marrying.”

“I hadn’t,” he said simply.

She bit her lip. She was pushing her luck, she could feel it. They might have declared themselves, but she was dangerously close to overstepping the bounds of his privacy.

Although…

She straightened. He’d asked her to marry him, for heaven’s sake. Surely that meant she was allowed to ask personal questions. Didn’t it?

She regarded his stern visage warily.

His voice was shockingly gentle. “Ask whatever it is you’d like to ask, Lady Sophie.”

She swallowed hard. “What has changed? Why are you determined to marry now?”

His gaze lingered on hers so long she thought perhaps he wouldn’t speak. But finally, haltingly, he began. “My mother died three months ago.”

His eyes grew clouded with grief, and her chest ached so suddenly and so fiercely she couldn’t draw in a breath. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

He nodded in acknowledgment. “She was a saint of a woman. She tolerated so much and all for my sake.”

Her mind raced with questions, but she pressed her lips together to keep them at bay.

“On her deathbed, all she asked was that I marry and have an heir. That I…” He cleared his throat and glanced away. “That I be happy.”

Her heart nearly burst at the hint of confusion in his tone. As if happiness was some mythical artifact she’d sent him off to find. She ought to stop with the questions now. He was clearly uncomfortable. But reason was still out for tea, apparently, because she leaned forward and clasped his hand in hers instead. “Do you think marriage will make you happy?”

His lips curved up, but she did not like this grin. It was filled with bitterness that did not suit him. “I am not looking for miracles, Lady Sophie. Merely a wife.”

Chapter Twelve

Raith regretted the words the moment they escaped his lips.

Sophie sat back with a jerk, her hand releasing his. He felt the loss of her warmth instantly.

Curse it. He'd had one mission when he'd entered this room, and he was failing miserably. He'd meant to propose and then make arrangements to meet with her brother to discuss the details.

Instead he'd managed to offend his potential bride. With a sharp exhale, he shook his head. "My apologies, Lady Sophie, I did not mean—"

"Oh no, do not apologize." She waved his words away with a frown. "I'm not offended just...sad."

He winced. Wonderful. He'd managed to make this sweet woman sad with his attempt at a proposal.

She nibbled on her lower lip as they regarded one another warily. "They must not have had a happy marriage." Her cheeks turned a stunning shade of pink at his frown of confusion. "Your parents, I mean."

He continued to stare. Not because he was offended but because —what was a man supposed to say to that?

She dipped her head. "I'm sorry. It is not my place to pry—"

"Nonsense." He was fairly certain he'd surprised them both with that. But watching her squirm with embarrassment was unbearable. Especially because he was oddly touched that she was trying so hard to get to know him.

He couldn't remember the last time anyone but Rush had the courage to even attempt it.

"I've asked you to be my wife," he said, brushing non-existent dirt from his pants for something to do with his hands and hide his discomfort. "You have every right to know just what you'd be getting yourself into with a marriage to me."

Her head tilted to the side. "And what would that be?"

He held her gaze, surprised and delighted when she didn't look away. Most did in the face of his prolonged silence. Rush had once informed him it was because his silences were often paired with a

menacing glare.

Not intentional, for the most part. Merely a habit.

What would a marriage to him be like? She truly wanted to know. And even though his heart gave a sharp thud of warning, his conscience forced him to tell her the truth. “I don’t imagine I’d be a joy to live with, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She blinked, her eyes widening slightly in surprise.

He crossed his arms and regarded her evenly as he leaned back in his seat. “My father was a hard man. A cruel man, if I’m being honest. He did not believe in coddling or shows of affection. Not toward his wife, and certainly not toward the son who would be heir. A dukedom requires strength and tenacity, he was fond of saying. In that regard, I suppose he was right.”

Her face softened. Her eyes grew shiny and—

Curse it all. Was she…crying?

His mouth went dry and his insides plummeted. “Lady Sophie, there is no need—”

She shook her head. “I’m all right.” But her quivering lower lip made a liar out of her. “I just…I’m so sorry you experienced that.”

He stared at her in horror. Now he’d made her *cry*?

This might be the worst proposal in history. He glanced around to see that her sisters were no longer even pretending preoccupation. They were staring over at them in open concern.

“Sophie?” the young one said. “Are you all right?”

Sophie nodded, but no one looked fooled by her watery smile. “Of course. Go back to what you were doing, I beg of you.”

They looked as unconvinced as he felt but they did as she bid. She leaned forward with wide eyes. “I’m sorry I got so emotional, it’s just the thought of you as a child in a house like that…” She trailed off with a hitch in her breath that made his heart ache in response.

Was it possible?

Was she crying…for him?

He sat back in his seat so quickly the chair gave a creak. Why would she cry for him? No one had ever cried over him.

“Have I made you angry?” She pointed to the space between her brows. “You’re scowling at me again.”

He sighed in exasperation as he made a concerted effort to smooth his brow. “I’m not angry with you, Lady Sophie.”

“And you will tell me if it is meant for me?” she asked.

“We’ve already promised to be forthright with one another, Lady Sophie. So yes, if for some reason I am not entirely pleased with you for some transgression I cannot even imagine, I solemnly promise to tell you.” He fought a ridiculous urge to laugh at the turn this proposal had taken. “And might I ask the same of you?”

“Of course! I would be happy to tell you whenever you displease me.” She sounded so earnest, he lost the battle with a smile.

“And for my part,” he continued. “I believe it is safe to say that in the future if I look at you thus—” He gestured to his face. “You may assume that it is not anger intended toward you. It’s just my face, I’m afraid.”

She bit her lip and he saw an answering glint of amusement in her eyes. “You see? Now that is useful knowledge for a future wife.”

His brows arched. “Is that a yes?”

Her lips curved up in a smile so beautiful it made his mind go blank with wonder. “Yes.”

His answering smile felt odd. It strained his cheeks and had his chest tightening with some sensation that was somewhere between a laugh and a shout of victory.

I’ll arrange to speak to your brother forthwith, that was what he meant to say. What actually came out of his mouth was, “Are you certain?”

She nodded. “I am. As you said, we are both in need of a marriage, and we are friends, are we not?”

Friends. The word had never sounded so silly as it did right now. He gave a grunt of agreement though. He’d told her about his father —something he’d only ever shared with Rush—so he supposed that made her one of his closest friends in the world.

But she was agreeing to be something so much more. And for all his talk of his father, he wasn’t entirely satisfied she knew what she was getting herself into.

“I am not always an easy man to get along with,” he said slowly.

She arched a brow. “So long as we agree to be frank with one another, I think we shall do just fine.”

He scowled. Was she being willfully obtuse? “I have a temper.”

“So do I.” Said with a shrug, as if it was meaningless.

He shifted in his seat as his mind raced to come up with more objections. Which was senseless. He was supposed to be procuring an agreement, not scaring her off before the deed was done.

But even so, he opened his mouth to inform her that even his

friends found him unbearably serious. She cut him off before he had the chance.

"Your Grace." She leaned forward with her brows drawn down in consternation. "You do not… That is, you don't actually believe that you are like your father, do you?"

The question caught him so off guard he could only gape at this woman and her audacity.

She sat back, her eyes widening as if he'd answered. "You do."

It was an accusation, and it broke him out of his shocked state. "I would never be cruel to you, Lady Sophie—"

"Just Sophie, please," she said hurriedly. "If we're to be married, we should be able to move beyond the titles, don't you think?"

"I agree." He leaned closer. "My given name is Raith."

"Raith," she repeated with a flush blooming in her cheeks. "It suits you."

His jaw clenched. "It's a hard sounding name, don't you think?"

"It's strong and masculine but not unkind. Just like you."

He shook his head. He knew what she attempting to say. He appreciated the effort, but he knew the truth. He drew in a breath to explain the sort of blood that ran in his veins.

She didn't give him a chance to respond before she rushed on. "And of course you'd never be cruel to me. I never thought such a thing."

"But be that as it may, I share several of the same traits as my father."

"Such as?"

Her tone was so challenging it had him gawking again. Blast, she'd reduced him to speechless fool so often he was starting to wonder if he'd win any arguments in this marriage.

Oddly enough, the thought of bickering with Sophie in front of his own fireplace made his entire chest contract as if he'd taken a blow.

"You see?" she said in response to his silence. "You might look like your father, and perhaps you have inherited some of his demeanor, but don't try to convince me that you're a cruel man." She primly placed one hand on top of the other in her lap. "I simply won't believe it."

Her sister's piano performance came to a cringeworthy halt as she hit the wrong notes. And he and Sophie stared at one another as though in a competition to see who would blink first.

He had no idea what to say. Some part of him wanted to argue with her, while another part was eagerly clinging to her words as though she'd just granted him a pardon on the way to the gallows.

She broke the silence first, a sheepish smile tugging at her lips. "Now then, shall we see if we can find my brother to make this agreement official?"

His chest was cleaved in two. Her easy acceptance, and her certainty that he was a better man than his father…

He cleared his throat as he came to stand and held a hand out to help her up as well. "His Grace and I are off to speak to Tobias," she said to her sisters, who did a truly horrid job of hiding their excitement.

They'd only just turned their backs to head out a side door leading in the direction of the dining room when they heard squeals behind them.

Sophie winced as he gestured for her to lead the way through the empty salon off the music room. "My apologies, Your Grace," she murmured. "It's not every day their sister gets engaged."

He chuckled. "It's quite all right. And, Sophie…?" He paused in the doorway leading to the main drawing room where the others would no doubt be gathering shortly for pre-dinner divertissements.

"Yes, Your Grace?" Her eyes were wide. Her cheeks still pink from the fire.

She was so lovely it made his heart race.

"I thought we agreed we'd use given names from here on out," he reminded her.

The pink in her cheeks deepened as she dipped her head. "That's right. I'd forgotten."

She peeked up at him with an adorable smile, one that spoke of shared secrets and a bright, beautiful future. "Raith," she repeated softly.

The sound of his name on her tongue made him happier than any one word ought. "Shall we go find your brother?"

She nodded but turned back to him quickly. "There's just one more thing, Raith."

His heart stuttered with a bolt of fear. Was she having second thoughts? Had she only now understood his earlier warnings?

She leaned in closer and lowered her voice to a near whisper. "Before we go any further, I'd say we ought to find out if we are compatible in other ways. Wouldn't you agree?"

He blinked down at her mischievous little grin, the words ringing with familiarity in his ears. When she glanced up meaningfully, he followed her gaze to see they'd paused beneath a mistletoe in the doorway.

A surprised laugh burst out of him, and he looked down to see her laughing softly as her cheeks turned crimson.

"I did say that, didn't I?" he teased.

She lowered her brows and dropped her voice in a poor imitation of his. "Before we go committing to marriage, don't you think we ought to at least share a kiss first?"

He'd never known he could enjoy being teased, but his heart soared at the familiarity of it. The intimacy.

He brushed a finger over her cheek, down her jawline to her chin. Her laughter trailed off with a gasp as his fingers found her chin and tipped it up. When his thumb brushed her lower lip, her eyes grew dazed and dreamy.

She was perfection. For a moment, he forgot where he was as his gaze raked over her rosy cheeks, her cute little nose, her lush lips…

"I think you're very wise, Sophie," he murmured as he leaned down close. "We should definitely seal this new deal with a kiss."

Chapter Thirteen

Sophie felt time stop as she waited for his lips to meet hers.

It seemed like a lifetime passed while she watched his gaze turn hungry, his fingers teasing the sensitive skin beneath her ear as he shifted his grip to cup her face between his palms.

Just like last time, her heart fluttered wildly in her chest, but she was keenly aware of every sensation—from the way his heat seemed to wrap around her like a cocoon and the way his warm breath feathered over her lips just before he claimed them with a kiss that was overwhelmingly possessive. And tender. So shockingly tender.

That gentleness in his touch that so perfectly tempered the intensity of his kiss—it made her insides melt and her mind go blank.

His lips glided over hers once, twice. And then he was teasing her lips with gentle nudges and kisses until she parted for him with a sigh.

Mine, he seemed to say as his mouth covered hers, his hands gently guiding her for more access.

The kiss was at once teasingly sweet and a tantalizing precursor of what was to come. And she wanted more. She forgot where she was and why as she leaned into him, swallowing his groan as their bodies collided and he dropped one hand from her jaw to her back, pressing her closer still.

"Sophie?" The sound of her brother's horrified voice burst through this dreamy, beautiful haze and had her darting back and away from Raith so quickly she nearly tripped over her own feet.

Her heart hammered against her ribcage as she took in the sight of her brother staring at her in horror and his friend, that incorrigible Jacob Smythe, the newly titled Viscount Spalding.

Both of them were staring at her, though Spalding looked like he was about to burst out laughing while her brother was turning red with rage and sputtering for an explanation as Raith held up both hands in a calming gesture.

"We were on our way to find you, in fact," he was saying by

way of explanation.

She winced as Tobias's eyes grew even wider and fury filled his gaze. Sophie leapt in between the two of them before he could say something too terrible to take back. "Tobias, please," she hissed. "Let me explain."

Raith's hand was on her shoulder and she felt his reassuring presence behind her. "Sophie, let me handle this. I'll see to everything."

She winced, trying to tell Tobias with a pleading gaze to let them speak before going off on a tirade. She wasn't the only Maxwell who sported a temper.

"I'm not interested in hearing what you have to say," Tobias said through clenched teeth, speaking over her head as he glared at Raith.

"I'd be interested." Tobias's friend Spalding sounded on the verge of laughter as he watched them all.

Sophie ground her teeth together to keep from snapping at him.

"What's going on?" Sarah's voice had Sophie spinning to see her and Samantha following in their wake.

"Just in time," Spalding called out to her sisters. "We're in for a bit of entertainment, thanks to the duke and your sister here."

Sophie gaped at her brother's friend as Raith growled behind her.

"Sophie? Is everything all right?" Sarah asked.

The silence that followed was excruciating as Sophie struggled to come up with the right words to explain.

It was Spalding who spoke for her, his voice filled with laughter as he breezed past them into the salon and headed for a cabinet stocked with liquor. "Everything will be right as rain, love, just as soon as I refill my drink."

He held up an empty glass in the face of Sarah's scowl.

Samantha, for her part, clapped a hand over her mouth, and Sophie couldn't say if she was stifling a gasp or a laugh.

All Sophie knew was that with her brother glaring and her fiancé growling, she was most definitely *not* in the mood for jokes.

Sarah came to stand by her side protectively, her hands on her hips in a pose that reminded Sophie of their mother as she turned to face Spalding. "I don't believe whatever is taking place here is any of your business."

The known rake with the unkempt hair that was currently

falling into his face had the audacity to wink at Sarah. “I’m not sure whatever is taking place here is anyone’s business but theirs. Still. Here we all are.”

“I will thank you to stop speaking about my future wife in such a manner.” Raith’s deep growl had everyone in the room turning back to him with open mouths.

Even Sophie.

“Future…” Tobias trailed off as his wide-eyed stare turned on her.

She winced. “As His Grace mentioned, we were on our way to speak with you.”

Tobias turned on his heel and barked at Sophie. “You will speak to me now.”

“Now listen here,” Raith started. But Sophie cut him off with a shake of her head.

“Let me talk to him first. Please.” She tried to force a smile but was met with Raith’s furious glare. “I’m just going to assume that’s not meant for me,” she whispered to no one in particular as she hurried away from her fiercely scowling fiancé to follow in her irate brother’s tracks.

Once in the next room where they at least had some modicum of privacy, he whipped around to face her. “Sophie, what on earth are you up to?”

“Tobias, just listen—”

“Didn’t you learn your lesson after that last mishap with a rake?” he demanded.

Sophie’s head jerked back as if he’d slapped her. “You know that wasn’t what people made it out to be. I never so much as held his hand.”

Tobias ran a hand through his hair, huffing in exasperation. “Fine, fine. I apologize. But you cannot tell me nothing has happened here.” He jabbed a finger toward the other room where he’d caught them kissing. “I saw you with my own eyes.”

“Tobias, it’s not what you think.”

“Isn’t it?” His brows shot up and his eyes lit with more anger than she’d ever seen from him in his life. “I’m not a fool, Sophie. I’ve heard all the rumors about that man.”

“And they’re just that,” she said, her spine stiffening as a wave of protectiveness swept through her. “Rumors.”

He gawked at her for a moment, clearly stunned. “You truly

believe that."

She arched her brows. "I know that."

"How?"

She lifted a shoulder helplessly. How to explain that she'd seen so much more of this man over the past twenty-four hours than she ever could have expected.

How to explain that she witnessed so much more than he'd ever intentionally let on.

But the moment he'd spoken of his father. The regret and love in his eyes when he spoke of his mother.

She'd understood him then. So much about his behavior and his demeanor fell into place like the missing piece of a puzzle. Strange to say after such a short period of time, but she truly felt like she knew the man.

She bit her lip as another wave of emotion hit. A wave of yearning and affection because…

She wanted him to know her too.

Her memory filled with the way he laughed at her teasing, the way he seemed to admire her courage. Maybe he already did. Or maybe he could.

She straightened to her full height. "I know he has only the best intentions toward me because he's asked me to be his wife."

Tobias's brows shot up. "Before kissing you?"

She opened her mouth to say yes but realized it was a lie, of sorts. Her hesitation lasted a second too long.

Her brother jumped on her indecision. "Aha!"

She let out a huff of exasperation. "Do not 'aha' me, you have no idea what has transpired between us, so do not presume that you do."

He crossed his arms with a glare. "Then why don't you enlighten me?"

"He wants to marry me, Tobias," she said evenly. "And I want to marry him as well."

He shook his head in confusion. "Since when? You two only just met. And you haven't even spoken of marriage since that first disastrous season—"

"But I mean to marry," she said. "I have no intention of being a spinster, and I refuse to let you or my sisters be burdened by my unmarried state."

"Me and—" He stopped short. "That's what this is about then."

She tilted her chin up higher. It would do no good to deny it. “It doesn’t matter the reasons. Let us focus on the fact that a duke wishes to marry me.” She threw her hands up. “This should be a boon to be celebrated, not a point to be argued.”

“I don’t want you rushing into marriage with the first man who comes along. That would be a match for the wrong reasons.”

“What if that first man is a duke?” She was teasing, but her attempt at a cajoling smile fell flat under his stare.

His expression was grim. “You’re doing this for me, aren’t you? You think I cannot handle the responsibilities, and—”

“Of course you can,” she interrupted quickly. “But you should not have to have all four of us under your guardianship. You shouldn’t have to take on the burden of helping the others have their seasons and find good partners all on your own.”

He glared at her mutinously.

“Let me help,” she said softly. “As a duchess, I could be endlessly helpful to you and to our sisters.”

His silence as he studied her was unnerving. “I do not like this, Sophie. And I won’t try to hide that fact.”

She bit her lip. There was a ‘however’ implicit in his words, and she fidgeted impatiently for him to continue.

“But as that man had the gall to kiss you right here in a crowded house party and under our aunt’s roof—” He cut himself off with an angry oath. “I will speak to him, and I will hear what he has to say. But you and I, Sophie…” He arched his brows meaningfully. “We are not done discussing this matter.”

She nodded, gratitude choking her as she backed away. She didn’t need him to understand totally or even be glad for what she’d done. But she did need his approval, and she hoped one day she’d even have his blessing.

“Thank you, Tobias,” she whispered as she rushed over to him and kissed his cheek.

He sighed and crossed his arms. “Do me a favor and take your sisters somewhere they will not be able to eavesdrop.” He sighed again as he crossed to the room where Raith waited. “It seems I have some business to attend to.”

Chapter Fourteen

Raith followed the Earl of Evans down a hall, up a set of stairs, and around a corner before they climbed another set of steps. They were making their way to the very back of the property, and Raith had to wonder if the earl had a nefarious intent in mind.

But when the earl finally opened a door, he invited Raith into a well-appointed study with a rich mahogany desk and gleaming wood paneling. It was masculine in its decor and situated to view the sweeping gardens beyond. In a private upper corner of the house, it was a place a man could really think. “Very nice,” Raith said, meaning the compliment but also hoping to break some of the tension from the meeting in the salon and the silent trek through the house.

Evans gave a stern nod. “It was my uncle’s. My aunt graciously offered it to me during my stay.” He gestured for Raith to sit as he made his way around the desk.

“How thoughtful.”

The earl gave him a pointed look as he too sat. “We are a thoughtful family.”

Raith gave a terse nod. “How nice.” He’d come to realize that about Sophie. It was one of the many ways in which she was well suited to him. Where he was cold, standoffish, she was warmth and fire and…

He closed his eyes, just for a moment, remembering their kiss. The way she’d stepped into his embrace without hesitation or fear. Her body had melded to his as if they belonged together.

So lovely.

So right for him.

The idea shocked him. When had he shifted from wanting a match with the first appropriate woman to wanting Sophie?

There was a difference, sharp and intense, and it stole his breath at the realization.

He wanted her. No one else.

His mother’s words came back to the forefront of his thoughts, the ones he’d shared with Sophie. Which in and of itself was telling.

Was it possible that Sophie could do more for him than just provide an heir? Could she...make him happy?

His heart filled his chest to near aching, and he blinked back his surprise. He brought up a hand to cover the loudly thumping organ, threatening to beat through his ribs.

He held a great affection for her.

By Jove, was he…was he falling in love?

The realization was as shocking as it was soothing. She fit him perfectly in so many ways.

"It *is* nice," the earl bit back.

Raith straightened up in his chair having completely lost the thread of the conversation. What was nice? Oh yes, Sophie. Her thoughtfulness. Raith gave his head a bit of a shake. He needed to pay attention. "It's one of the qualities I'd admire about her. Greatly."

"As well you should. It's the only reason she's allowed you to court her."

Raith cocked his head. He'd lost the thread of the conversation again, but this time it wasn't because he hadn't been listening. "I beg your pardon."

The earl's fist thumped on the desk. "You should be begging my pardon. For a number of reasons. The first of which is that you asked my sister for her hand without first asking my permission."

Raith winced. He was guilty on that count. He couldn't deny it. "My apologies."

"Are you out of money? Did you spend it all at the gaming table?"

Raith let out a growl. The man went too far. "Your lack of respect—"

"Your lack of respect to my family and to the rules of society are what have brought us to this point." The earl jabbed his finger as though the digit would drive home his grievances.

Raith's spine stiffened to the point of aching. He didn't explain himself. Well, that wasn't true. He'd done so with Sophie and he'd been surprised at how sharing had been a bit like lifting a weight from his shoulders.

One more reason he knew she was the right woman. She eased the aches inside.

He swallowed down the rumble of realization. He'd become emotional. He'd allowed himself to love.

He sat back in his chair, staring at her brother.

Much as he'd like to tell this man to go to the devil, he couldn't.

Sophie meant everything to him. And this was her family.

Drawing in a long breath, he spread his hands out on the desk. "I am not an easy man. I understand that. Just as I understand, many families would jump at the chance to pair their daughter or sister with a duke, despite any reservations the girl in question might have. I promise you that any disrespect I've displayed was in Sophie's best interest. I wanted to ensure that she was amenable to the match before I involved the family."

The earl sat back in his chair too as he scraped a hand through his hair. After a long, thoughtful silence, the earl spoke again, and his tone held grudging acceptance. "My name is Tobias. I don't give many men leave to call me such, but it's the name my sisters have always used."

The tension in Raith's shoulders eased somewhat as he recognized the other man's words for the olive branch they were. "Tobias. I'm Raith."

"Raith," the earl repeated. "What you've just said, it...makes sense." He met Raith's gaze evenly. "I appreciate your explanation."

"Good," he said. Perhaps Rush had been correct, after all. Perhaps sharing one's thoughts and feelings really did have great benefit. He and Tobias seemed to be reaching an understanding.

"Which is why I am going to explain my thinking to you," Tobias continued.

Unease slid down Raith's spine as Tobias leaned forward.

"What do you need to explain to me?"

Tobias tapped his fingers against the desk. "We are a close family, Raith. More so than most. Our strong bond means that we are willing to sacrifice for one another."

"I see," he answered, shifting in his chair as he rubbed a hand down his leg. He'd like to flex his fingers to relieve the tension building inside, but he didn't wish for Tobias to see what sort of effect the man was having on him.

Tobias let out a sharp exhale. "So, while I appreciate your intentions, you got it exactly wrong."

Raith frowned. "What?"

"If you'd come to me first, I would have told you that my sister was liable to accept your suit for our benefit. For mine and our sisters'. She is the one who is eager to pair with a duke because it

will help us. Not because it is something she desires."

Raith felt the blood drain from his face. Here he was, facing the realization that he was falling in love, meanwhile she had only ever wished to help her family.

He hadn't heard much of Sophie and Tobias's whispered conversation in the corner of the salon, but he'd caught a few scraps. Tobias's accusation that she was rushing into marriage with the first man who came along, and for all the wrong reasons.

And Sophie's response. *What if the first man is a duke?*

His fist clenched against his thigh. Was that what he was? The first man to come along and make an offer?

And a duke, at that. An undeniable prize for a young lady looking to marry well.

This was hardly a shock, he told himself as ice slid through his veins.

He'd known this from the start.

He'd been well aware this was only a marriage of convenience for her. Of course he had. That was what they'd agreed to from the start. Having it spelled out so coldly shouldn't hurt.

She'd been nothing but honest and upfront with him. It was he who'd changed his mind. Gone and allowed emotion to enter their agreement.

Him. The situation was almost laughable if it didn't have such dire consequences. He was going to marry a woman he'd fallen for while she only wished to help her family. She loved. Deeply. Just not him.

Raith couldn't even be angry. Sophie had been clear from the first she was eager to wed. Her aunt had even mentioned that the match was for the benefit of her brother.

But when Tobias said it like that... His head began to throb. "I see."

Tobias swept his hand down his face. "There will be no more rakish overtures where my sister is concerned."

Raith's jaw clenched. If he'd learned how to explain himself earlier in life, he might have avoided this painful interaction and all the misunderstandings that had happened with Sophie to begin with. No wonder she didn't feel the same about him. He might not be like his father, but he wasn't exactly the sort of man a woman would just fall in love with.

Difficult, closed off, unwilling to explain, and unwilling to

change. That was him, and not even sweet Sophie could explain that away.

But Tobias wasn't done. "If she truly wishes to wed you, I'd be a fool to stand in the way, but I want you to fully understand her reasons. If you're content with them, then I am content in the match. But I'll not have you disappointed with my sister, and if I'm honest, I will encourage her to find a man she truly loves. She needn't settle."

"Settle?" The word sliced through him as surely as a rapier would cut his skin. Is that what she was doing? Of course it was.

Tobias winced. "That was harsh. I apologize."

Harsh? "Yes. It was." But unfortunately for Raith, he could also see the truth in it. And caring as he did for Sophie, he shared the man's sentiment. She did deserve love. She deserved all the very best things in life, and he, in all honesty, was likely not the man to give them to her.

Tobias shook her head. "Sophie has been indispensable to me these past several months. After the death of our parents, I…" He looked down at the desk top. "I don't know what I would have done without her." He looked up again, meeting Raith's eyes. "I don't mean to offend, but I'd be remiss if I didn't give my sister every advantage that she deserves."

Raith swallowed down his regret. "I understand, and you're a good brother to do so." He shook his head. His own chest was aching with all the cuts Tobias had delivered, but he did so to protect Sophie and how could Raith argue with that?

He couldn't. All he could do now was attempt to make right all that he'd done wrong. And when it came to Sophie, it seemed he'd fumbled at every turn. "Is your friend trustworthy?"

"Spalding?" Tobias gave a huff of rueful amusement. "He's a rogue of the first order."

Raith shifted in his seat. "But will he tell others about the kiss he witnessed?"

Tobias's brows drew together. "If there is one thing you can trust a rake to do, it's keep a lady's secrets."

A sad smile that held little humor curled one corner of his lips. "My offer still stands for your sister, but if she were to change her mind, I'd like to give her every freedom to do so." The words were sour in his mouth and tension pulled at the cords of his neck. He'd hate to let her go. She was the one thing that had lightened his life

in such a long time.

But with stark clarity that left him speechless, he realized one thing for certain. When a person loved someone, really loved them, they'd give up their own happiness for the benefit of the other.

And because he loved Sophie, if she'd be happier without him, he'd let her go.

"Thank you." Tobias gave a nod, relaxing for the first time since they'd arrived in the room. "It's all I ask. And if she still chooses you, then I will give her away without regret."

Regret. That was the perfect word.

Raith had many.

And he wondered, by the time this day was done, if he'd have several more.

Chapter Fifteen

Sophie was back to pacing.

Her brother and Raith had been gone for an excessively long time.

The only thing distracting her from wondering what they might be discussing was the incessant bickering of Lord Spalding and her sister Sarah. From the moment he'd entered the room Spalding seemed to have made it his mission to rile their normally calm, collected sister.

And Sarah, in turn, had taken the bait at every turn. "Calling someone an owl is not a compliment," Sarah said stiffly, her arms crossed in indignation.

"I like owls," Spalding said, his eyes wide with feigned innocence and his hands splayed wide. "And with these whatsits—" He gestured to her spectacles. "The resemblance is uncanny."

Sarah's cheeks pinkened even further, and Samantha piped up from where she was sitting on the settee. "Lord Spalding, please do stop ruffling my sister's feathers."

He jabbed a finger in Samantha's direction, his grin wide with triumph. "See there? Even your sister imagines you have feathers."

Sarah opened her mouth as if to protest but stopped with a frown as Spalding took a swig of his drink and stumbled forward unevenly.

"You do know you're not supposed to drink like that in the company of ladies, do you not?" Sarah's nose wrinkled up in disdain.

Spalding took another excessively long swallow, tipping the glass high in the air as he leaned his head back. When he finally dropped the glass, he gave Sarah a devilish smile. "Do I look like the sort of fellow who follows gentlemanly rules?"

"You look like a viscount. Which is why I would have thought you might act like one." Sarah said, her chin rising in the air.

Sophie's nerves were already crackling with tension. The two of them weren't helping. "Should we return to the music room? Sarah, perhaps you'd like some additional practice on the pianofo—"

“No,” Sarah said with a firmness that made Sophie cease pacing and stop to really look at her sister. A flush filled her cheeks, her eyes sparkling with…malice? Excitement? It was difficult to say behind her spectacles.

All Sophie knew was, she’d never seen Sarah so riled.

“We could play a game,” Samantha offered, rising from her seat on the settee.

“No.” This one from Spalding. “It’s bad enough I’m trapped in the company of—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Sarah warned. “And, just to be clear, you are free to go. Please. I beg you.”

His brows rose. “And miss all the fun?”

Sarah stilled, giving him a long stare before she spoke again. “I think your idea for a game is an excellent one, Samantha.”

Spalding gave a groan, his eyes rolling to the ceiling. “I know a few good drinking games. One involves lighting punch on fire.”

“You’re deplorable,” Sarah muttered.

“Thank you,” he answered with a rakish grin as he combed back his ever disheveled hair. “I do my very best.”

Sophie stared between them. They reminded her of two children bickering. She remembered a boy in the village she’d been enamored with at the age of nine. She’d talked to him in just the same way.

Which made her brows rise. For the life of her, she could not picture Sarah being infatuated with anyone. Her sister was so practical and sensible. Intelligent to a fault, except, of course, when it came to feelings.

A slow smile pulled at Sophie’s lips at the thought of her practical sister forming an attachment with a knavish rake like Spalding.

It couldn’t be.

Could it?

As she watched, Sarah huffed loudly in exasperation, a display of emotion so uncharacteristic of their thoughtful, refined sister it had Samantha’s brows arching in surprise as well.

And the way Spalding was eyeing Sarah…

Sophie was realizing now that the man hadn’t ceased staring at Sarah since he’d entered the room.

Sophie blinked in surprise. Well, this *was* interesting.

She’d worry if it were any other rake. But with Spalding’s

relationship with her brother, she was certain the man would behave himself. Her brother would most certainly step in if he thought his rogue of a friend posed a threat in any way.

Their brother was overprotective to a fault like that.

Which promptly reminded her that her own fate was currently in her brother's hands.

She spun about, staring at the door as though watching it would make them enter.

The room behind her went quiet as hushed footsteps sounded in the hall.

While her exterior had gone still, inside, she was humming and vibrating, her heart and pulse racing.

She brought a hand to her throat as Tobias entered looking rather stern and not entirely happy. What did that mean?

Raith followed, his usual glare firmly in place.

Sophie met his dark gaze, questions piling up on the tip of her tongue.

He made his way directly toward her, his hand sliding under her elbow.

His touch unfurled something inside her, and the knot of tension relaxed a bit. "Raith?" she asked.

His shuttered expression gave nothing away, and any tension that had ebbed returned with a vengeance. "May we have a word?"

She numbly nodded, looking about the room. Every set of eyes was upon them. They'd have little privacy for this conversation. There was no pianoforte to cover their words, and her brother would not even pretend to occupy himself.

Neither would Spalding. In fact, he gave her another grin. "Do speak up. We can hardly hear you."

Sarah stepped next to him, and Sophie nearly laughed when her elbow landed in his side. With a soft whoosh, he bent over, his hand coming to his ribs. Sarah gave her a wink.

Sophie smiled back. And then she drew in a deep breath. With a nod to Raith, she turned and started for the connecting door that would lead them back to the music room and give them some modicum of privacy.

"Sophie," Raith murmured behind her, touching her elbow just as she reached the doorway. "We shouldn't."

That surprised her, and she turned back to him. They were engaged. As such, it was completely appropriate for them to be in

an adjoining room alone. “Why not?”

He straightened taller, his hand dropping from her arm. “Because—” he started and then stopped abruptly as if he had no idea how to continue.

But she didn’t look at him. Instead, she met her brother’s gaze, his jaw clenched so tight, it looked as though it might shatter. “Because?” she asked, glancing back at Raith. The man she’d agreed to marry.

But he wasn’t looking at her. Instead, his gaze was fixed on some point off her right shoulder. “You deserve choices.”

She tried to breathe normally, but it came out ragged. What was he saying? “I’ve made my choice.”

His gaze met hers evenly. “And I commend you for it.”

Confusion furrowed her brow. What was he saying? What was happening here? “I’m not sure I want your commendations.”

He grimaced before his face returned to that impassive mask. “I don’t blame you.”

This was not the same man she’d spoken to in the music room. Where was the warmth? The sharing? “Raith, I don’t understand. What are we talking about here?”

He drew in a deep breath, bending a touch closer. “I know that we’ve both agreed to a marriage of convenience.”

Her mouth went dry. “We did.”

“But I’m not certain, upon reflection, that it’s wise.”

The corners of her eyes pricked. Was he...did he wish to end their engagement? Her hands flew to her mouth. She’d allowed him another kiss, pressed her body to his, and now, he wanted to break it off?

She was ever the rake’s fool.

But for the first time in her life, she calmed the anger rising up like the tide. She’d not allow it to cloud her mind now.

Perhaps her own words had triggered his decision. She’d asked him if he thought their match would bring the happiness his mother had wished for him.

Upon reflection, had he realized that Sophie would not bring him such emotions?

Her hand came to her mouth. With a force that slammed into her, she realized that he made her happy. At least he had before this conversation.

Wildly, breathtakingly happy. When his lips had touched hers,

her body had recognized what her mind had fought.

She was in love.

Silly fool. Once again, she'd given her affection to a man who did not return it.

Part of her wished to lash out. But how could she hurt someone she cared so much about? "Your Grace, I think you should go."

He nodded, the lines of his face taut with tension. "Of course."

He turned to leave and Sophie's shoulders hunched, grief threatening to overwhelm her. But she couldn't cry. Not now.

Then, without warning, he turned back. "If ever you decide you bear some affection for me…" His hand reached out before he dropped it to his side again. He didn't finish his statement but instead, turned and stormed out of the room.

Sophie stared after him, his last words completely confusing her. If she bore affection for him?

Affection for him?

"Well that was decidedly boring. I'd expected more," Spalding said, holding another decanter of amber liquid.

Sophie stared at him. "Lord Spalding," she said with all the aplomb she could muster. "Get out."

Rather than argue, he filled his glass, gave her a salute and started for the door, whistling some sailor's ditty as everyone watched his retreat.

"Why are you friends with that man?" Sarah huffed. "He's—"

"Deplorable?" Samantha asked with an impish grin.

"Do stop," Sophie said, wiping a hand across her brow. "My heart is about to break into a million tiny pieces."

"Your heart?" Tobias echoed. "What does that mean?"

But she couldn't begin to answer, her mind was spinning wildly as her heart beat frantically, caught somewhere between hope and despair.

He'd made it sound as though he wanted her to have feelings for him. As if maybe…

She shook her head. Maybes would get her nowhere. They'd already had enough of unspoken explanations and mistaken meanings.

"What did you say to him, Tobias?" she asked, moving toward her brother. "He left one man and came back another." And then it dawned her. He'd come back the closed off, shuttered man she'd known that first night. Not the man she'd come to know. Planting

her hands on her hips, she fixed her brother with a glare. “You’d better tell me everything. And you’d better do it now.”

Chapter Sixteen

Raith had only just made it out of the room when he realized what a fool he was.

He ran a hand over his face as his stomach sank in horror.

What an irrational, unbearable fool.

He fell back against a wall in the hallway, his heart pounding so hard, he was certain he could feel it smashing into pieces against his ribcage.

What had he done?

He heard voices coming from the music room and moved on instinct, stumbling down the hallway toward a door leading to the back veranda. He couldn't face anyone right now, not until his heart stopped shouting at him to turn back. To be selfish. To claim Sophie as his own.

He'd only just leaned against the wall, breathing in the cold night air, when the door opened behind him. He straightened and turned, his heart giving a sharp jerk of hope and then falling flat when he saw it was Rush, which meant…

It wasn't Sophie coming after him to tell him she did care for him.

Oh blast, was that what he'd been expecting?

No. His shoulders fell as realization hit. But it was what he'd hoped.

Rush caught sight of him and his eyes widened with surprise. "Ah, there you are. I was wondering where you'd gone off to." His gaze wasn't on Raith but was scanning the dark grounds as if waiting for something to come bounding out of the woods in the distance. "You haven't seen Lady Serena, by chance, have you?"

Rush turned to look at him then, and his expression fell in concern. "Raith? Are you all right?"

"Yes. Of course." His voice sounded stilted even to his own ears.

Was he all right? No. He knew logically that what he'd done was for the best, but his heart was clambering in protest, his mind racing in denial.

His entire body felt split in two between wanting what was best

for Sophie and yearning for what *he* wanted more than anything.

He groaned as a wave of yearning and regret hit him so hard he nearly toppled.

Being with Sophie. Talking to her. Opening to her… It had cracked open something inside of him that had long been buried. He'd thought it dead, but he'd been wrong. His father's hardness hadn't smothered it, and his mother's death hadn't killed it once and for all as he'd hoped.

It was there, this craving for connection, this desire for compassion. The need to protect and take care of someone of his own. It was there, and it would no longer be ignored.

"Raith, what's happened?" Rush asked.

Raith shook his head, not even sure where to begin. How to explain to his friend that like a fool he'd gone and fallen in love with the woman he wished to marry.

It hardly sounded like a disastrous event. But it was.

He'd been so sure he didn't need love in his life, but one glimpse of what it could be like to love and be loved and he was ruined.

"I tried to be noble for once in my life," he muttered to Rush with another shake of his head. "And now I've ruined everything."

What he meant was, he'd lost his one chance at happiness. But how to explain that one irrepressible woman had slipped into his life and made herself as necessary as air to his survival?

It sounded ludicrous, even to him.

Rush crossed his arms and leaned back, regarding him with a solemn frown. "Perhaps you'd better start from the beginning."

Raith sighed, but in fits and starts, he got out the gist of it.

Rush gaped at him when he was done. "And so you just...ended it?"

Raith straightened at his friend's horrified tone. "I was trying to do right by her." He threw his hands out. "That's what one does when one cares about someone, isn't it? They put that person's feelings above their own?"

"Yes, but…" Rush sighed so loudly it startled a bird in the tree overhead. "Raith, did you ever consider that she might have feelings for you too?"

Raith opened his mouth and promptly shut it. No. He had not. "She's only marrying me because she wants to help her family."

Rush arched a brow. "Did she tell you that?"

"Well, no, but—"

“And did you, perchance, think to tell Lady Sophie how you feel?” Rush continued. “Did you explain your reasoning?”

“Er—”

“And did you think to ask her how she felt about your releasing her from this marriage that she said she wanted?”

“Er—”

“Raith…” A rare hint of impatience laced Rush’s tone. “What exactly did you say to her?”

Raith scrubbed a hand over his face. “Not much,” he admitted. “Not much at all.”

The silence that followed felt like an accusation. Raith didn’t have to look up at his friend to know he’d be wearing a frown of disappointment.

“I was trying to do right by her,” Raith said at last.

“Were you?” Rush shot back. “Because from where I’m standing, you did what you always do. You buried your feelings and gave orders.”

Raith scowled but he couldn’t deny it.

“You are a strong man, Raith,” Rush said. “From what little I know of your family, you’ve had to be.”

Raith looked away, his chest too tight to speak.

“But being cold, aloof, and decisive isn’t the only way to show strength. Sometimes the most courageous acts come from showing weakness. Leaving oneself open to pain and hurt.”

Raith nodded slowly. “Yes, I think I’m beginning to understand that.”

And that was precisely what his heart was shouting about. It was calling him a coward for walking away without so much as a fight. It was telling him he’d made a mistake, not in wanting the best for her, but in not telling her how he felt. In not asking her outright if she could ever feel the same.

Shame filled him as he realized that there was only one reason he hadn’t bared his heart and asked her about her feelings in turn.

He’d been afraid to hear her answer. And so he hadn’t even given her a chance to have her say.

“You’re right,” he said, raking a hand through his hair. “And?” Rush prompted, impatience clear in his voice now. “What do you mean to do about it?”

Raith’s heart slammed in his chest once more. But this time it was with determination and resolve. “I’m going back there and I’m

going to speak to her. I'm going to…" He paused to take a deep breath, his chest swelling at the thought of what he was about to do. "I'm going to tell her how I feel."

Rush clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Good man."

Good man. The words seemed to follow Raith as he retraced his steps to find Sophie. He wanted to be a good man...for her. She made him want to be a better man than the one he'd been before she'd opened his eyes and his heart.

His pulse was racing and his muscles were tense as he moved quickly through the hallways.

She couldn't have gone far. Surely he could find her and—

"Oof!" Sophie whirled around the corner and ran straight into his chest. She would have fallen backwards but he reached out on instinct and held her close.

For a heartbeat they stayed like that. Her staring up at him with wide eyes, and him gazing down at her, his heart aching with emotions.

Emotions that he would share regardless of the consequences. With that thought, he moved to release her and step back. It would be too easy to kiss her if he kept touching her. And much as he'd love to taste her lips again, it was no longer his right.

"Lady Sophie," he said as he stepped away from her. "I was just looking for—"

"No." The one word was sharp and rang in the air between them. She followed it up with a jab of her finger into his chest. "Oh no. You don't get to walk away again." Her cheeks filled with color and her chest began rising and falling rapidly. "Apologies, Your Grace, but I don't particularly care who or what you were looking for because I have been searching for you."

He blinked, his lips parting in shock. He'd seen her in a fit of temper before, but never like this.

The sight was breathtaking. *She* was breathtaking. Her eyes were bright as diamonds, and she fairly vibrated with passion and life and...and feelings.

The sight of all those emotions in her eyes did a strange thing to his insides. His blood heated as his heart clenched and then swelled.

This woman would be the death of him.

And he loved it. He loved *her*.

"Sophie, please," he started. "If you'll just let me explain—"

"No," she said again, this time with a shake of her head that had

a dark brown tendril slipping from her coif to dangle by her cheek. “You had your chance to speak, but you didn’t give me the same opportunity.” Her chin came up. “So now, Your Grace, it is my turn to speak.”

He opened his mouth to protest once more. He had so much to say. So much she needed to hear. But she was right. He hadn’t given her a chance. He gave a short nod. “Shall we find a place where we might speak in private?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, and he caught a flicker of confusion and doubt in their depths. He hadn’t allowed them that privacy just a moment ago because he’d been thinking only of her reputation.

But now…

Now that flare of heated emotions in her eyes gave him hope, and that hope gave him courage. He gestured toward the veranda where he’d just come. “Lord Rushton is on the veranda, and I’m certain he will respect our privacy while shielding your reputation from damage.”

Her lips twitched and she looked like she might protest, but after a moment, she gave a short nod. “Very well. I suppose I’d rather not have every guest in attendance stumbling upon us while I say my piece.”

He could say the same. His heart was still thudding furiously in his chest at all he was about to tell her. But now that he’d decided to tell this woman how he felt, he could hardly wait to say the words.

He turned and led the way back to the veranda in a silence that was only interrupted by the rustling of her skirts.

Rush had been right. If he meant to do right by this woman, then that meant telling her the truth about how he felt and letting her decide for herself how she wanted to proceed.

It meant, in short, handing over his heart for her keeping…

And just praying she didn’t crush it.

Chapter Seventeen

The burst of fresh cool air did wonders for her head but did nothing to calm her raging emotions. This was exactly what she'd meant to avoid. The whole point of this house party and a quick match was to avoid…this.

This overwhelming crush of feelings that had her wavering between shouting in anger, crying in misery, and running off into the surrounding trees out of sheer terror at what she was about to do.

Raith murmured some sort of explanation to Lord Rushton about their need for relative privacy as Sophie clasped her hands before her, only dimly noting Lord Rushton's surprise and easy acquiescence as he turned to face the grounds, leaning over the railing as if he were out here for stargazing and not even aware of her existence.

When Raith returned to her, his expression was grim as ever but there was nothing cold nor hard in his eyes. And the fact that he was feeling something—*anything*—gave her the courage to open her mouth.

"I wasn't even supposed to like you," she blurted out.

It did not, however, give her the sense to choose her words wisely.

His brows arched up slightly in surprise and she drew in a deep breath, cursing herself inwardly for having uttered such nonsense. But this was precisely what she'd meant to avoid. "What I mean is, I had every intention of making a match based on practicality and reason," she said, taking heart in the fact that she'd managed to speak coherently when all she wanted to do was rant and rave.

She unclasped her hands before her and then clasped them tightly again as he moved toward her slowly, almost warily.

Her heart tugged. She wanted to run to him. She wanted to go up on tiptoe and press her lips to his. Like a fool, she wished she could turn back time to their last kiss…before this newfound dream had fallen apart.

She wet her lips and swallowed hard. "I know you were

traveling during my first season, and I'm not certain how much you heard of the...the rumors."

His flinch of regret was brief, but she caught it, along with the clear sympathy in his eyes. "You owe me no explanations, Sophie —"

She cut him off with an exasperated huff. "I know that. You've just called off our engagement before we'd even made it official. I know very well I owe you no explanations."

He opened his mouth to cut her off, but she held up a hand. "Please. Allow me to finish."

Pain pulled at his features, but he remained silent as he clamped his lips shut with a short nod.

She shifted from one foot to the other. Was she really about to expose her own humiliating past right now after all he'd done to hurt her?

She shut her eyes. Be brave. She wouldn't have her answers until she was done, but she'd known that when she set out after him.

This man might be powerful and he was undoubtedly strong, but when it came to speaking about emotions, she had to be the strong one here. The fact that she understood this so well, that she understood him so innately gave her the courage to carry on.

"It's not a terribly good story," she said with a shrug. "Nor is it very scandalous." She wrinkled her nose at the thought of wasting a single precious breath on that arrogant dandy who'd fooled her. "I was young and sheltered. He was greedy and manipulative." She shrugged again. For a while the mere memory of the rake had hurt her, but it had been ages now since she realized what she'd felt for him had been nothing more than a girlish fantasy. "In short, he was a rake, and I was a fool. He said he loved me, and I believed him."

Raith stilled. "It wasn't love?"

She shook her head and knew she wasn't imagining his relief, nor the flicker of jealousy she'd seen. "It wasn't. It was romance and fairytale, and it was…" She sighed. "It was a young girl wanting to see something that wasn't there."

"What brought an end to the matter?" he asked.

"My brother." Her lips quirked up in a pale attempt at a smile. "For all that he irritated me tonight with his high-handedness, during my first season, it was warranted. And I was grateful to him for interceding. He informed the fellow that even if we married, he'd make sure my father never handed over the dowry…" She

waved a hand. “All false threats, of course. Just to suss out his true nature.”

He winced. The great and powerful Duke of Barton winced on her behalf. “I’m so sorry, Sophie. You deserve better.”

She nodded. “I think so. Which was why I was so determined not to let emotions have any part in my choice of husband.”

His jaw clenched and his nostrils flared as he nodded. “I understand.”

She huffed. “Not yet, actually. What I’m trying to say is that…” She threw her hands up, losing the battle with emotions in spectacular fashion. “I wasn’t supposed to like you.”

He frowned. “Yes. You’ve said as much.”

“I didn’t want to have feelings, but I do.” She felt tears prick her eyes and her tone was admittedly childish as she added, “And it’s all your fault.”

“My fault?” he sounded horrified and confused, and she couldn’t blame him. Tears were sliding down her cheeks now and she couldn’t seem to stop them.

“It’s your fault,” she repeated. “And I thought you should know.”

“I see,” he said with a frown.

He stared at her for a long moment, his eyes flicking back and forth as he read her expression and seemed to think through her words. “Are you finished?”

“Pardon?” Her voice was thick with unshed tears. Was that it? He’d heard her out and now he would leave? Panic rushed through her at the thought. She hadn’t expressed herself well at all. She hadn’t made him see.

“Because I would like my chance to speak as well,” he said.

There was something in his voice, in the low rumble of it that had her peering closer to see that his eyes were filled with so much emotion it stole her breath.

“I was a fool,” he said. Moving forward, he reached for her like a drowning man clutching a rope. “I am so sorry, Sophie.”

He tugged her in close, his arms wrapping around her waist.

“Sorry?” she repeated dazedly.

“I was trying to do right by you, but I got it all wrong,” he said. He shook his head in frustration. “When your brother told me you were only marrying me to help your family, it stung. No, it cut me deeply. And I realized in that moment that I’d fallen for you,

Sophie."

Her eyes widened and the night sky seemed to spin around them as she tried to catch her bearings.

He leaned down closer and she could see the intensity in his stare, his need for her to hear him. To understand.

Sophie clutched his shoulders as she tried to stay grounded, rooted in this moment when her heart and body suddenly felt lighter than air. She would surely float into the sky if he hadn't kept such a firm hold of her.

"I should have told you right then and there," he said. "I was so certain you didn't feel the same, but it was wrong of me to keep the truth to myself."

Her lips had parted with wonder. "I understand."

His brows drew together in a frown and she saw a protest forming. He thought she was just being kind, but that wasn't it at all.

"I do understand," she said. "The reason I told you that silly story about the rake who'd tried to fool me was to show you that I truly do understand. I know what it's like to not want to feel. I understand how it can be easier to *not* feel rather than risk getting hurt again."

He tensed as she reached out a hand and pressed it to his chest just over his heart.

"And you have been hurt, by the people who ought to have taught you love." Her heart clenched painfully at the raw emotions in his eyes.

"My mother tried," he offered.

She nodded, her throat too choked to speak at that roundabout way of confirming the truth in her words.

"She had her own battles in that household," he said in a voice so low it was hard to decipher. "And she wanted me to be strong enough to stand up to my father."

Sophie nodded again. "But in the end, she only ever wanted you to be happy. And if that doesn't speak of true maternal love, I don't know what does."

He leaned down until his forehead rested against hers, his breath hot against her cheek. "You make me happy, Sophie. You have since the first moment we spoke, and every moment was a surprise and a delight."

Tears were streaming unchecked now, and Sophie couldn't bring

herself to care. She wrapped her arms around his neck. “You make me happy too, Raith.”

He kissed her then, hard and sure. The kiss was a promise, and she met his urgency with all the feelings in her heart.

“Are you certain?” he asked when he came up for air.

She laughed breathlessly. “It’s a bit late to back out again, don’t you think? There are only so many times I’m going to let you walk away from this engagement before I really lose my temper.”

He let out a shocked laugh. “This wasn’t you losing your temper?”

She winced. “One of my faults, I’m afraid.”

His lips curved up in a wicked grin that made her belly flutter and her heart do a flip. “Good thing for me, I absolutely adore you when you’re angry.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “And when you’re trying so hard to be practical.” He kissed her forehead. “And when you’re snuggling up to me when you’re cold.” He kissed her cheek. “And when you’re mistaking me for another…”

His teasing tone made her burst out in a laugh that had him pulling back to regard her with such sweet affection, it warmed her to her toes. “To answer your question, I am certain.”

“Even though this has all happened so suddenly?” The fear in this strong man’s eyes made her want to weep all over again. “It doesn’t seem like you’re repeating your past with that rogue? Because I’d never—”

She cut him off with a finger over his lips. “I know you, Raith. We might not have been acquainted for long, but I know you.”

His lips quirked up beneath her lips. “I’m starting to suspect you know me better than I know myself.”

She laughed as she dropped her finger. “But what about you?” She arched one brow teasingly. “You’re the one who got cold feet just moments ago. Perhaps it’s me who should be asking if you are certain.”

He flinched. “I’m so sorry I gave you reason to doubt my feelings or my intentions,” he said. “I assure you, the only reason I had second thoughts was because I was afraid you wouldn’t return my affections. In my foolish way, I was attempting to help you.”

She grinned. “But now you know I feel the same, so we are of one mind.”

He nodded, his smile more open and genuine than any she’d ever seen from him. Her insides grew warm, and she could have

sworn her heart melted in her chest at the thought that this was only the beginning. She could hardly wait to see all the ways this man would learn to embrace his emotions once they were wed, once they made a home together without the specter of his father hanging over him. Once they started a family of their own…

He tugged her in close again and leaned down to nuzzle the soft skin beneath her ear. “What is it, love? You look as though you might cry again.”

“They’re happy tears, I assure you,” she said through a watery smile as she wrapped her arms around him and held on tight. “I was just thinking of our lives and our future.”

“Our family,” he added softly, the low rumble of his voice next to her ear making her shiver.

“Our family,” she echoed.

When he moved to cover her lips with his again, she knew deep in her heart that this kiss wasn’t just a promise. It was a vow for their future and the happiness to come.

Epilogue

Two days later...

Sophie sat curled against her future husband, basking in the glow of their newfound love.

They'd announced their engagement, which meant they were free to enjoy each other's company in private. A fact they were taking full advantage of.

Raith leaned down, kissing the tip of her nose. His arm was around her shoulders, his head bent low next to hers, as his fingers moved lightly up and down her arm.

A fire crackled merrily in the hearth of the sitting room they'd sequestered themselves in. "This is delightful," she murmured, sinking even deeper into him.

"It is," he replied, his hand stopping its methodic ministrations to give her arm a squeeze. "But we have some important matters to discuss."

That made her straighten, moving away from him as her eyes narrowed. What did he mean by that? "Such as?"

His smile made her relax again. It was easy and playful. "Do we have a spring wedding or a summer one?"

She let out a little laugh even as she swatted at his arm for frightening her. "You had me worried."

He chuckled. "Did I even come close to sparking your temper?"

She tsked, settling back into the crook of his shoulder. "No. You did not." Her head came to rest in the hollow of his neck. "But you are right. We'll have to decide soon how and when we'll wed."

"Special license? We could be married in a fortnight."

She looked back at him. "Did you look outside? It's snowing again. How would you ever make it to London?"

Both of them turned to watch as fat flakes of snow floated by the windows, completely marring the view of the gardens beyond. "I suppose I wouldn't." He kissed the top of her head. "And I'd curse the weather for keeping us from holding our nuptials, except that it was snow that kept me here before. Imagine if I'd been able to

leave…"

Sophie gave a shiver. That would have been awful. If he'd gone, would they have ever found their forever?

He held her closer, wrapping his other arm about her.

"Well, thanks to the snow, no special license." She tipped up her chin to look at him. "Therefore, I suggest we marry in the early spring."

"In London?" he asked as he brushed a hand over her cheek.

She nodded. "Samantha's fondest wish is a season so my family will be there already."

"A season?" he gave a tiny groan. "We're going to have to help with that, aren't we?"

Sophie wrinkled her nose. "I'm afraid so. Welcome to the family." But inwardly, she felt lighter knowing that her husband would be there to help lighten Tobias's load. Her hand came to his chest. "Someone is going to have to scare the rakes away from my little sister. I think you might be perfect for the job."

He chuckled at that. "Well, when you put it that way…" But he didn't finish, his lips coming to hers in a kiss that warmed her more than the fire. Winter was a lovely season indeed.

A sharp knock at the door made her pull away. Who would even know they were here to disturb them so? "Yes?"

"Sophie?" Serena called from the other side, her voice sharp with fear. "May I come in?"

"Of course." Sophie bolted up from the chair as her sister opened the door. Serena rarely looked ruffled, but she did now. Her hands were clasped together, her shoulders hunched, her face etched in lines of worry. "Serena," Sophie gasped. "What's wrong?"

Serena frowned even as she nibbled at her lip. "It's Sarah."

"What about Sarah?" Fear skittered along her spine as Raith stood too, wrapping his arms about her.

"Well, the truth is, Samantha and I have been looking for her since she missed the midday meal and we can't find her anywhere."

"Can't find her?" It was a big house but surely not *that* big.

Serena's hands fluttered at her sides. "Samantha mentioned something about her travelling to the village this morning, but…" Serena trailed off, her gaze going to the windows and the thick snow that fell, coating the ground.

"The village? Why?"

Serena took a step forward. "She needed more accounting

journals and there was a party going that she joined. But the carriage came back at the first sign of snow and we still can't find her."

Sophie swallowed down the lump of rising panic as Raith's arms tightened about her.

"Let's search the house again," Raith suggested. "Get everyone who can to discreetly help. We don't want to harm her reputation by announcing this to the party at large."

"Who would that be?" Serena asked, twisting her hands. "Samantha. The two of you. Tobias. Lord Rushton. My aunt. And maybe Lord Spalding?"

Raith gave a quick jerk of his chin in affirmation and Sophie felt a tiny bit of her fear recede. Raith had the right of it and she felt better knowing he was here to help.

But an hour later, they'd search every inch of the house and stables, as Serena, Raith, Rush, and Tobias prepared to begin searching outside. They were assembled near the kitchen door, the snow even heavier than before.

"Where could she be?" Sophie cried, holding Samantha's hand. "You don't think she's still in the village, do you? All alone?"

Tobias grimaced. "In all likelihood, yes." He raked his hand through his hair as guilt tightened his features. "I should never have let her join that party without one of our family to accompany her."

Sophie patted his arm. "It's not your fault, Tobias."

He didn't seem to hear her. "If she went to the village to make purchases, that means she brought a purse with her, correct? I didn't take notice when I walked her out to the carriage, but she must have some coin with her, yes?"

Samantha nodded. "I would think so. How far is the village from here?"

"Mayhap two hours in this weather," Raith said. "If we don't find her on the grounds, I'll ride to the village myself."

"Where is Lord Spalding?" Samantha asked. "Can he help us search the grounds too? It'll go faster if he does and, honestly, I'm worried about anyone riding in this."

Tobias shook his head. "I can't find him either."

That made Sophie's heart stop in her chest. "You don't think that our sister is..." She trailed off, her hands coming to her cheeks. "Stranded with a rake."

Tobias straightened. "Now see here. Spalding is a good fellow.

Yes, he drinks a fair bit, but he'd never hurt one of my sisters."

Sophie gave her brother a long glare. "You'd stake her future on that?"

"No one's staking anyone's future," Raith said, his tone low and soothing. "For all we know, Sarah is just out in a sleigh or—"

"Sarah far prefers being inside at a desk," Serena interrupted. "We'll search outside, but I don't believe she's out on the grounds." Serena wound her scarf around her neck for a second time. "I'd bet my dowry that she got lost in the bookshop and missed the return carriage."

Tobias nodded. "That's encouraging. And if Spalding is there then—"

"She's ruined for certain," Samantha finished.

"Why do you keep saying that?" Tobias's jaw clenched.

Sophie looked at her brother, her irritation clearly visible as her chin notched up. She was still just a tad angry about his meddling and how he'd nearly ruined everything with Raith. "Because, Tobias. Your friend is no good. We've put up with him for you, but sincerely, he's a cad. Worse. And if he's alone with Sarah, you must do something about it quickly."

"I'll go with him to the village," Raith said, giving her fingers a comforting squeeze. "We'll bring her back before anyone even realizes she's gone. Or, we can stay with her until the snow—" But his voice tapered off as a single figure made their way toward the kitchen door. It was difficult to make out the details in the thick blur of white as Sophie squinted to try and see.

Was it Sarah?

Spalding?

The lone figure waved, picking up speed. Whoever it was, they were in breeches, not skirts. Sophie said a silent prayer that her sister was safe as she watched the person break into a run.

She squeezed Raith's hand tighter.

How were they going to find her sister and bring her home?

Want to know what happened to Lady Sarah? And where is that debaucherous Lord Spalding? Find out in A Snowstorm Serenade for Lady Sarah...

A snowstorm Serenade for Lady Sarah





Lady Sarah Maxwell drew in a sharp breath of cold air that seared her lungs. She hadn't meant to breathe in quite so deeply but she'd found herself doing so anyway. Her brother didn't seem to notice as he continued on with his mildly infuriating story.

"And then Lord Spalding raised his glass and toasted the entire tavern. Even after the ruckus he'd started. Can you believe it?" Tobias chuckled as they continued on toward the line of carriages headed to the village for an outing.

"From him? Of course, I can," Sarah muttered as she tried to keep from coughing thanks to the freezing air.

They were attending their aunt's Christmastide house party, a gathering meant for a specific purpose, to help at least one Maxwell sister find a husband.

A feat her sister Sophie had already accomplished. Thank the stars.

It wasn't that Sarah didn't want to marry...

All right. Perhaps she didn't really wish to marry. But if she did, it would be to a man who admired her less conventional qualities rather than one who attempted to suppress them.

Qualities her family had accepted about her but the rest of the world had not. Lord Spalding might have been a new acquaintance, but he was proving to be the worst of her tormentors. Ever since they'd been introduced at this house party, he'd gone out of his way to point out her flaws.

"Don't be like that, Sarah." Tobias turned toward her, his deep baritone filling the thin air around them.

Her answer was the crunch of snow under her boots. They'd been over this before. Many times. Lord Spalding was Tobias's less savory friend. A fact that Tobias seemed to delight in, but Sarah, as the manager of the family's finances, was less thrilled with.

At her silence, her brother sighed. "Sarah-Beara, why am I getting the silent treatment?"

She winced at his use of her childhood nickname, stopping in the snow to look up at him. "I'm not giving you the silent treatment," she said softly, her mouth pulling into a frown. Or she wasn't trying to. Her brother had been through a difficult year. With the death of their parents, he'd taken over the earldom and become guardian for all four of his younger sisters.

Which was why she and her sisters had concocted this house party in the first place. Tobias needed help. And with Sophie marrying a duke, he'd get that help.

But it would also be a great aid to the earldom if he'd stop associating with the likes of Lord Spalding.

"You are. You've hardly said a word since we left the house." Tobias raised his brows meaningfully as he started them toward the carriages again. He wasn't coming into town with her, just walking her out after a morning spent working together.

Well, she'd worked. Totaling large columns and making certain their profits were growing, as Tobias discussed various improvements to their properties.

It was an arrangement she was very happy with. She loved numbers and columns of figures. Loved the smell of fresh paper and the satisfaction of adding them up and cross checking her work to find she'd done it correctly.

There was nothing better.

"It's just that I've noted some strange withdrawals," she started,

giving her brother a sidelong glance. She'd asked before. But he'd been evasive, which was very unlike him.

"Sarah," his voice developed a tense edge that he never used when speaking with her. "I've told you. They're nothing. Truly."

She pursed her lips. "Sums that large are not nothing."

He let out a long breath, the air in front of his face turning white with the heat of his breath. "I'm not at liberty to tell you more. At least for now."

She shook her head. They normally shared everything. Everything. She loved her sisters dearly, but Sarah and Tobias... They'd been more than just siblings. They'd always been the best of friends.

She thought of Spalding again. Her brother had always had male friends and Sarah didn't begrudge him that. But sincerely, every time he was with Lord Spalding, large sums of money went missing.

It made her scared.

And coupled with Spalding's erratic behavior at this house party —drinking, carousing, mayhem—she was absolutely certain the viscount was leading her brother astray. "But we never keep secrets from one another."

His brows lifted as he gave her a meaningful stare. "Never?"

Her breath caught and then she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. Because the truth was she had kept a secret from him recently. "Well..."

He stopped again. "Really, Sarah. How could I not know?"

Her mouth opened and closed as she attempted to formulate an answer. Guilt made her stomach twist into knots. Was he referring to their plans to find a husband at this house party? Had she kept anything else from him? Were they actually discussing what she thought they were discussing? "Not know what?"

Sarah's heart began to pound in her chest. How much did he know? Because their aunt had asked every highly eligible gentleman to this house with the express purpose of at least one of the Maxwell sisters making a match. But they hadn't told Tobias because…

Well, because they wished to protect him from the weight of responsibility. But if he'd known what they'd been up to, he would have never allowed it. He would have put a stop to their plans, which was why they'd kept it secret.

He'd thwarted their every attempt to help him in the year since their father's passing, saying that he was able to take care of them himself.

He'd never accepted their help in the past—with the exception of allowing Sarah to keep the books. It benefited them both. So, she and her sisters had kept it a secret, a fact which Sarah knew would make it all the more painful for him if he were to discover they'd gone behind his back.

"You know very well what I'm talking about. You and—" But Tobias stopped as the first carriage in the line began to pull away, the reins snapping as the horses brayed, stamped and started to move.

Rushing forward, they made their way toward the only carriage with the door still ajar. Sarah wasn't eager to head to town in this frigid weather and with so much still unresolved with Tobias, but she needed a new accounting book, having filled her current one.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Tobias asked as they finally reached the carriage, both of them a bit out of breath.

She shook her head. "No, that's all right. Aunt Clara is in attendance." She squeezed his arm. "We'll finish this discussion tonight."

He gave a quick nod. "All right." Then he handed her into the vehicle. "And Sarah. Try to enjoy your outing. You deserve to have some fun after toiling over those ledgers all morning."

She stopped, her feet in the carriage but her head still out. It was a phrase he repeated to her often. All her siblings accused her of not having enough *fun*. Which was ridiculous. What was fun anyway but a lack of responsibility? A delay of the inevitable? "I have plenty of fun."

Tobias rolled his eyes and then smiled at her, his gaze dancing with amusement. "Buying new ledgers does not count as fun."

She huffed as she heard the carriage in front of hers begin to move and she ducked into the vehicle. Tobias snapped the door closed behind her. The forward-facing seat was occupied by a couple, their heads bent tightly together. Turning toward the rear-facing seat, she stopped in mid-step.

One man sat on the left side of the bench, the spot next to him open. But she didn't move.

Because the man was the Viscount Spalding and he looked about as happy to see her as she did him.

Which was to say, not happy at all.

Her gaze narrowed as her tongue clucked against the top of her mouth. “You.”

“You,” he replied with a grimace. But where her admittedly rude ‘you’ was a comment, his was an accusation.

“Me?” she shot back. What on earth did he mean by that?

“Yes, you,” he replied, sitting straighter. He opened his mouth as if he were going to say more when the carriage lurched forward.

She was still standing, well, hunching really, and her position did not allow her to shift as the carriage moved, sending her rocking backward.

For a wild moment, she thought she might land in the lap of the couple behind her but with quick reflexes, Lord Spalding grabbed her waist and hauled her toward the empty spot on the bench.

They’d never touched before. But as his hands circled her waist, a sensation like lightning flashed through her.

His hands were gone as quickly as they’d grabbed her, her breath coming out in short gasps as she found herself suddenly seated next to him. Surely she hadn’t reacted to his touch, she’d only been frightened by her sudden change in position. Her heart hammered in her chest as she covered her heart with her hand. As she looked over at his hard, strong jaw and the flex of his broad shoulders, she had a moment to wonder what had just happened. His chocolate brown hair brushed back from his forehead in large waves, highlighting his aristocratically handsome features.

“For such a smart woman, you’d think it would have occurred to you to sit,” he chastised from next to her.

And her wonderings were gone. Disappearing like the vapor of breath in the cold air. Had she thought he might have caused her speeding heartbeat? “For a viscount, your manners are truly deplorable,” she returned. “A gentleman would inquire after my health and then assure me it had been no trouble to assist me.”

He looked at her with a single brow arched. “You’re going to educate me on how a gentleman should behave?”

She lifted one shoulder. “I don’t make a habit of it, but when a man needs educating as much as you…”

“Fascinating.” His lips hitched up on one side.. “I’ve never met a woman who considered herself such an expert on literally every subject.”

His words stung and she dipped her head. It wasn’t the first time

he'd called her out on being a bluestocking. In fact, he did so regularly. Oh, he always smiled as he mocked her. Always made it seem as if he were merely teasing. But his words cut, and his laughter only made the sting that much more lasting.

It was as if he knew it was her sorest spot. Even now, her chest throbbed painfully at his words. "Not every subject. Only a few. And it's hardly my fault that you can't behave with even basic decency."

His chin snapped up, his eyes flashing with surprise. "That is…" He swallowed, turning toward the window. "A fair point. My apologies."

Sarah blinked. Had he just apologized? How odd. Still, all apologies aside, she didn't like him or his influence on Tobias and, just as clear, he didn't care for her either.

All facts worth repeating to herself because his unexpected apology had a niggle of guilt in her belly. He seemed able to effortlessly goad her into saying the strangest things. Like her comments about his manners just now. Why had she said that?

Just because he was rude and crass didn't mean she ought to be as well.

On the other side of the carriage, the couple they rode with gave a giggle, and Sarah's gaze slid to them, expecting to find them laughing together, their heads still bent in private conversation. But as she looked over at them, both of them stared directly back at Sarah.

She started as the woman leaned forward. "What a beautiful day."

Sarah's brows lifted. She supposed the weather had warmed a bit since she and Tobias had stepped outside, but overall it was cold and grey. "Lovely."

"Good day to start the rest of your life," the man added, his hand sliding into the woman's. And then they bent their heads together again.

"What do you think they meant by that?" she asked in a whisper, mostly to herself.

But Lord Spalding answered anyway, his voice tainted with a bitterness she'd never heard before and she didn't understand. "Who knows. People don't talk rationally when they've gone and done something as foolish as falling in love."

She blinked, studying Lord Spalding with even more care than

usual. He often needled her, but normally he was a jovial fellow. Likely why Tobias liked him. But today there was a bitterness to his tone and his wry smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Lord Spalding. Is everything all right?" She leaned forward, studying his face in the dim light of the carriage.

He looked over at her, his frown as evident as the deep line creasing his forehead. "I…" he started, and that's when she caught it. The scent of whisky on his breath.

She leaned away suddenly, realizing the genesis of his irritating behavior. He was drunk. Already.

He straightened too. The lines in his face growing even deeper. "I'm fine."

Sarah straightened, facing forward and adjusting her skirts over her knees and ankles. It wasn't her business. And if she had her way, it wouldn't be Tobias's either. Lord Spalding was no good and today only confirmed what she already knew. The man was trouble.

"It looks like snow," the man across from them said as he peered out the window.

"It just snowed," his wife answered, her hand resting against his chest. "You really think it might do so again?"

"It might," the man responded, craning his neck for a better view of the sky.

The woman smiled. "How delightful. Even more opportunities for snowmen and sleigh rides, and other diverting activities. Don't you think another snowstorm would be welcome, Lord Sparling?"

Spalding looked across at them, giving them his usual rakish grin. "I can't imagine Lady Winterbourne's house party could grow any more entertaining than it's already been."

The woman giggled, returning his smile. "Very true. What a lovely party it's been." Then she gave Sarah the tiniest wink. "But somehow I predict it will be even better before too long."

Sarah shook her head in confusion. Better than this? She was stuck in a carriage with her least favorite person in all of England. She supposed it couldn't get much worse. "You're likely right," she said with an answering smile.

Besides, they'd reach the village soon enough and then she and Lord Spalding could part ways. That would surely make her day better.

And when she returned home, she'd finish her conversation with Tobias. That would make her feel better too.

Could she ever convince him of what she herself knew? Of all his friends, Spalding was the absolute worst.

With any luck she could.

And that truly would make this house party a success as far as Sarah was concerned.

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